

This is Not a Banjo

Essays about making music (and other stuff) by Patrick Costello & Dear Old Dad



For Amy & Miss Trudy

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Introduction

In the late 90's my father and I were at creative loose ends. We had just had an amazing run as performers, disk jockeys, festival promoters and stage managers only to have each and every project taken from our control.

We daydreamed about a medium where the two of us would be able to do as we pleased. We hoped to discover a creative wild frontier where we could stake a claim and make a go of it without having to kiss hands and shake babies.

The first time I logged into my college roommate's AOL account I knew we had found a place to strike a homestead. We went immediately to work building our first computer and by 1998 we were broadcasting banjo and guitar lessons on our first web site.

It took time for our audience to find us, but once the ball was rolling my father and I quickly found ourselves with tens of thousands of students around the world. It was an interesting situation because we were treading on entirely new ground. No folk musician had ever had direct contact with the multitude before so the two of us had to learn how to teach to massive audiences as we went along. We experimented with video, audio and text-based workshops and discovered that each medium offered unique advantages. With audio and video we could talk to the student. With text something interesting happened. The written word allowed the student to create his or her own private Patrick and Dear Old Dad.

Think about it for a second: as you read this introduction your mind creates a sort of narrative voice for the written words in front of you. That voice is always going to do a better job of getting ideas past your defenses with more ease and grace than any visual or auditory trickery. Reading makes it personal and interactive. Hearing and seeing will never force you to use your imagination in the same way as the written word.

Over the years my father and I have used just about every medium to teach, but when it comes down to brass tacks the written word – as simple and low-tech as it may be – is still the most direct and powerful tool in our arsenal to get technical ideas and concepts across.

In these pages you will find a collection of workshops and essays we created over the years. Some are direct answers to questions, others are our own random observations and a few are just instances where we were experimenting with ways to present technical data to our online students.

While none of this would have been possible without the students (after all, what is the point of writing if there is no one to read your words?) I think the lion's share of my gratitude should be directed to my dear friend, business partner and co-conspirator, Dear Old Dad. Not many children have the chance to change the world alongside their fathers and not many sons have the chance to discover their voices with such an unfailingly honest friend and advisor.

I love you, pop. Here's to our further adventures in the wild frontier.

Patrick Costello

11/22/11

Accidental Accuracy

Mike writes:

My question concerns what I call string "attack" in clawhammer banjo. I've been at this for years already and, maybe it's because I have an index finger nail that will not grow (it doesn't extend beyond the fingertip), but I am still occasionally (certainly not always) hitting more than one string with the right hand or missing the string entirely on my first strike. As a result, my playing is not "clean." In order to compensate, I learned to up-pick (a la Pete Seeger) and I have no problem there with attacking the strings cleanly. Everything would be fine, but something is sacrificed: that wonder snap that you get with the downward stroke of the nail in real clawhammer playing. My up picking results in a mellower, though not unpleasing sound, although I still use the nail in a downward motion to do the downward brush. So, I guess I look like I'm playing clawhammer but I am really up-picking because I am afraid of missing the string. I really do prefer that wonderful clawhammer sound, so do you have any suggestions for me?

Well, you made the choice to move from down-picking to up-picking. Stop comparing apples to oranges and look for ways to make the most of the technique you are using.

It won't sound like frailing because it's not frailing. That is neither good nor bad. It's just the way it is. Instead of comparing what you are doing to another technique, just focus on making the most out of what you've got.

As for missing a string . . . well, that ties in to the next part of your note:

Oddly enough, in all the banjo posts I read, hardly any one complains about the 'difficulty' of striking the strings cleanly when using the clawhammer technique. Is it just me? For some reason, it seems much more natural to up pick the strings, as a "pluck," rather than strike downwards with the back of the nail.

It's all in how you start. If you practice the basic frailing strum correctly from day one the issues you mention never really come up.

Sure, picking down seems counter-intuitive and unnatural at first glance. Any technique or skill seems that way before you master it. That's where dedication comes in. As I have said before, what people mistake for talent is usually nothing more than a willingness to work on something beyond the point where a rational person would quit.

The one honking huge bugaboo people have with frailing seems to be accuracy. It bugs the daylights out of me because the magic of frailing lies in the fact that it's a rhythmic approach to making music. There isn't any need to worry about hitting a wrong string because, if you are doing it right, there are no wrong strings.

Look at it this way:

- You have four strings to play melody on
- In open G tuning two of those strings are tuned to the same note
- A chord is (usually) made up of three notes.

With that in mind we come up with the big secret to folk music in general:

"If you are in rhythm and following the chord progression there is no way to hit a wrong note."

Try it. Grab you banjo and start frailing a basic quarter note and two eighth note rhythm. Now run through the chord progression to any song in 4/4 time and just let your first quarter note fall randomly from string to string.

What you will find is that everything fits.

As you practice you will find that some strings sound better than others and as your skills develop it'll be easier and easier to pull a distinct melody out of the mix - but that only happens after you have mastered your basic rhythm skills.

Seeger-strumming, frailing, fingerpicking or whatever. The choice of technique isn't as important as its application. You have everything you need. It's just a matter of not being afraid to use it.

-Patrick

12/6/06

The Hobo Code

The day of the hobo is over. It is not “safe” to travel with no money, credit cards or real destination. We are careful not to get too close to disheveled strangers in tattered clothes who may ask for a handout or a place to rest. Those of us fortunate enough to have an income which enables us to have purchasing power far in excess of basic human needs are uncomfortable around anyone who, for whatever reason, lacks what we take for granted.

The desperate times during and after the great depression are just stories to most of us and the notion of being open, generous and compassionate to a man broke and on the road is non-existent. There was a time, however, when thousands of hobos wandered the roads and railways of America. I know, because I met some of them.

My father had a sandwich shop on Route 30 in Wayne, Pennsylvania. I remember seeing and talking to hobos. All they asked for was something to eat and a place to rest. One old fellow stopped twice a year, once heading West and once traveling East. He carried an old guitar and would sing for his supper. They were never turned away and no one chastised or judged them. They were, after all, hobos walking toward a horizon that only they could see.

But how did they know where to stop? What led them to choose one home, farm or business over another? The ones who came to our door always passed by first and then turned around and came back. They did not come as beggars. They knew that they would be offered something to eat, a place to rest and some company. The adults swore that there was some kind of a code, mark or signal that identified this business as friendly but no one ever found it. Many years later I came across these symbols in a magazine, the name of which I have long since forgotten. There may be more, but these are all I have. No one but the hobo’s ever saw the mark that identified my father as a compassionate man. Which one do you think it was?

Peace to all,
Pat Costello
(*Dear Old Dad*)



These people will help you if you are sick.



Poor water.



Good jungle, make yourself at home.



Police officer lives here.



This symbol tells you what direction a buddy is traveling in.



Dishonest man, don't ask for work.



Good place for a handout.



You can sleep in this farmer's barn.



Religious people, be sanctimonious.



Bad bull, stay out of rail yard.

Ceci n'est pas une banjo

Marc over in France writes:

Hello, First, I would like to congratulate you for your so communicative musical enthusiasm as well as your remarkable on-line lessons. The way you present your lessons and advises is just what someone really interested in music needs.

The cultural and social elements you mix in your books and lessons are really the spark allowing us to explore widely, in a non trivial manner, the music in general.

I think that the best gift you make to everybody, in your lessons or written notes, is your kind of philosophical approach of the music, allowing anybody to consider the music as a real life roadmap rather than a simple hobby.

Thanks for that.

So, what about stopping the congratulations!!

Well, I'm French and I discovered your site one week ago on a ukulele forum.

I love old folk songs, have spent a little time with clawhammer on ukulele, and when discovering your site, I told to myself " Wow, playing this kind of music on a banjo, THAT's what I want !".

But I don't have no banjo and don't plan a priori to buy one soon (for financial considerations but of course my aim is to get one at last).

So here's my question.

In spite of this, and in order to play banjo, I have pick up one of my old acoustic guitar and tuned it as a banjo (with a high E string tuned as high G on the 5th string and no 6th string), and began to make use of your great lessons, and this doesn't sound so bad.

Nevertheless, do you think this way of doing suitable for banjo learning (at least for a given period), and don't I risk to take bad habits for the moment I would play on a real banjo?

Irene good night, this is a tricky question to answer!

On one hand we've got the simple and direct answer. On the other hand we've got a more complicated answer based on my own opinion.

Let's start with the simple and direct answer: What you are doing is fine. It won't hurt anything.

That said, setting up a guitar like a banjo is not something I would recommend because what you end up with in that kind of setup is neither fish nor fowl. You give up the power and dynamics of the guitar for something that lacks the power and dynamics of the banjo.

Instead of trying to learn a technique designed for an instrument you don't have I would suggest adapting the frailing concept to work on the guitar.

In frailing banjo we use a down-picking motion to strike the strings with the back of our middle fingernail. The thumb is used to pluck the short fifth string and sometimes to play one of the four long strings.

Here is a breakdown of the basic frailing strum:

Strike a string with the middle fingernail:

```
D --0-----
B -----
G -----
D -----
G -----
```

Strum down across the strings with the middle fingernail:

```
D ----0-----
B ----0-----
G ----0-----
D ----0-----
G -----
```

Roll the thumb off the fifth string:

```
D -----
B -----
G -----
D -----
G -----0-----
```

The basic rhythm pattern most frailing banjo players start out with is a quarter note and two eighth notes. 1 2& 3 4&

```
D --0--0-----
B ----0-----
G ----0-----
D ----0-----
G -----0-----
    1  2  &
```

One interesting thing about the frailing strum is that our middle fingernail ends up playing the "numbered" beats and the thumb plays the "and" beats.

```
fingernail:  1  2  3  4
thumb:           &      &
```

That's the banjo, but you don't have a banjo. You have a guitar. Let's take a look at the old six string together.

On the guitar we don't have a short thumb-string, but we do have two additional bass strings. Instead of trying to reconfigure the guitar to have a thumb-string it's a lot easier to just turn the frailing pattern upside-down.

Strike a bass string with your thumb:

E -----
B -----
G -----
D -----
A -----
E --0-----

Strum a chord with your thumb:

E -----0-----
B -----0-----
G -----0-----
D -----0-----
A -----0-----
E -----

Pick up with your index finger:

E -----0-----
B -----
G -----
D -----
A -----
E -----

Put it all together and you get:

E -----0-0-----
B -----0-----
G -----0-----
D -----0-----
A -----0-----
E --0-----
1 2 &

Look familiar? Let's look at them side by side:

Banjo:

D --0--0-----
B -----0-----
G -----0-----
D -----0-----
G -----0-----

Guitar:

E -----0-0-----
B -----0-----
G -----0-----
D -----0-----
A -----0-----
E --0-----

It's the same, "1 2& 3 4&" rhythm, but on the guitar our thumb ends up playing the "numbered" beats and the finger plays the "and" beats.

thumb: 1 2 3 4
finger: & &

Just like with frailing banjo, once you nail this rhythmic pattern on the guitar you can change it up in all sorts of crazy ways. Head over to archive.org and search for my Folk Guitar and Subway Shuffle videos.

The other cool thing that happens is once you can "think" in terms of that basic quarter note and two eighth note rhythm pattern on either instrument you can move on to the other without too much fuss and bother. When you start digging into how folk music works you end up at a point where the instrument in question doesn't matter. The frailing concept can be adapted to the ukulele, mandolin, autoharp, harmonica or anything else you pick up.

As René Magritte tried to convey in *The Treachery Of Images* (a painting of a pipe with "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" - this is not a pipe- inscribed below it) it's all too easy to get wrapped up in labels.

Just saying that something is this or that won't make it so. Try smoking Magritte's pipe and the meaning of his imagery hits home. If we apply that same kind of thinking to music suddenly terms like banjo technique or guitar technique don't mean all that much. They are rhythmic techniques that can be applied anywhere.

So instead of trying to force your guitar into doing something it wasn't meant to do my advice would be to embrace the strong points of the guitar. If at some point down the road you end up with a banjo you'll have the basic rhythmic concepts mastered - and in the meantime you'll be able to play and sing a million-bazillion folk songs.

What you do next is up to you. If you are happy frailing a five-string guitar then by all means keep on going. In folk music there really is no right or wrong. I just wanted to point out that you don't have to force the guitar into playing the role of another instrument.

-Patrick
12/22/06

Breaker-Breaker

During the 1970's the CB radio craze completely freaked America. Everyone had a CB radio and a "handle". The handle was sort of like a mask. You could be anything or anyone with complete anonymity. Little old ladies became tough eighteen wheelin' mommas. Mild mannered office drones impersonated brawny over the road truckers. Everybody knew that everyone was full of horse feathers but nobody cared. It was harmless fun to let your alter ego loose.

There was a corny sort of elegance to the game. It went something like this:

Breaker-Breaker. This is the Diesel Dragon here. Anybody got their ears on?

Ah, roger that Diesel Dragon you got the Turnpike Terror. What's your 20, over?

Just passin' the 147 marker on 80 west. Saw a Smokey in a plain wrapper with a Polaroid, over.

Ah, roger that Diesel Dragon. Them bears are thick and mean out here. Thanks for the heads-up. I'll ease off and catch your rockin' chair after the 147, over.

And on, and on, and on.....

Now fast-forward thirty years. Citizen Band radio is as dead as the dodo. Turnpike emergencies are handled by cell phone and nobody plays make pretend anymore, right? Wrong! Simply log onto any Internet music chat room or forum and ask a simple basic musical question. You will immediately be swarmed by experts offering up advice that any competent musician would laugh at. They may hold forth from a platform consisting of thousands of posts. Others hide behind handles that protect them from scrutiny. Some even hope to impress you by using "banjo" or some other instrument as a prefix to their name. How is a beginner to know that the advice being offered is not coming from a non-musician who has no real knowledge, ability, experience or chops?

The sad fact is that you cannot know. The Internet has opened the world to each and every one of us. It can be a blessing or a curse depending on how it is used. The harmless games played out on CB radio a generation ago were just fun. No harm, no foul. However the confusing, conflicting and often downright wrong musical advice offered by folks playing let's pretend can do irreparable damage. The formula is quite simple. Agree or experience firsthand just how much noise an empty barrel can make. Ask for a demonstration of the technique or skill that is being boasted about and you will get an elaborate excuse. Press the matter and you will be swarmed by toadies and sycophants berating you for upsetting the status quo. Now in all fairness, some of these characters can pick out a few tunes from memorized guitar or banjo tablature but they are not musicians. Their world is a very limited musical subculture and they are quite content to use the forum social structure to create an Internet personality at your expense.

If you are a beginner listen to all types of music. Ask a lot of questions. Challenge what your common sense tells you cannot be true. Read all you can. Play, sing and interact with the people in your neighborhood. Join or start a jam session. Be sure to make everyone welcome. If you go into a forum just be careful. The posers will say and do most anything to convince you that they are grizzled old timers with a lifetime of musical knowledge when in fact many of them have never taught, performed or jammed except in a fantasy. They have no skills to share so they endlessly repeat (or make up) the nonsense that all too often passes as sound advice. These people are not your friends. They do not care whether or not you ever play a note. Their one fear is that you may master the core musical skills that they did not have the character to learn. Their worst nightmare is that you will go on to play, sing, perform, teach and generally change the world.

My only fear is that you may give up before you have the chance.

Peace to all,

Pat Costello (Dear Old Dad)

2005

Dances with ears

Jim in Illinois writes:

I've been playing guitar for about 6 months and trying to learn frailing style banjo for about half that time. I'm having trouble hearing chord changes on both instruments, especially when I try to sing and play and the song goes from G chord to D chord. I get a lot of lyrics off the internet and usually there are no chords with them. I want to develop the ability to play the melody within the chords but I have to know what the chords are before I can do that. I guess what I'm asking is what is the best and fastest way to learn to play by ear?

Well, Jim, there are two ways to answer your question. A simple and direct answer and a complicated answer. The simple and direct answer is the one I'd recommend, but for reasons I can't comprehend most folks don't want to hear a simple and direct answer. In fact, the simple and direct answer hits them like an atomic wedgie.

Let's start with the simple and direct answer:

Picking up chord changes and improvising are skills that come with familiarity. In other words, practice and play long enough and you'll hit a point where it all makes sense.

Play simply, get together with as many musicians from as broad a range of backgrounds as possible and start teaching things like the basic frailing strum to beginners in your neck of the woods. Have faith in the craft and let the learning process happen as it needs to happen.

As I said before, the simple and direct answer drives some people to distraction. It is human nature to want to cut out the whole developmental phase and look for a way to do all of the cool stuff right off the bat. A huge part of the music education industry is devoted to playing on that desire. Super-secret techniques, gadgets, gizmos, tabulature and a whole bunch of other stuff marketed under a heavy blanket of false hope.

We know deep down that most of this stuff is never going to work but we line up to pay up because there is always the chance that the magic formula to instant music is right around the corner.

A way to make the jump from student to artist without a lot of work.

To a person looking for instant musicianship the idea of devoting yourself to the craft is kind of like chewing on tinfoil so they'll yell at me that it can't be that simple.

That's where the complicated answer comes into play.

In order to understand improvisation you almost have to think of it as a big skill made up of smaller skills.

- The picking hand
- The fretting hand
- Tying the picking hand and the fretting hands together
- Rhythm
- Music theory

At first glance that list doesn't look too bad until you stop to realize how much training is required to master each skill. It takes time and hard work to master the picking and fretting hands. It takes even more time to learn how to get the two hands to work simultaneously - and even more time to get the two working well enough to start working in different rhythms. Factor in music theory and you've got a ton of learning to do and a lot of hard work to apply those concepts.

When you break down the learning process in this fashion things suddenly become overwhelming because the list of "stuff" you are required to know in order to play something as simple as The Inky-dinky Spider gets too long to be printed here. Heck, if we approach things in this fashion just figuring out the chord progression to Ink-dinky Spider would require writing out the melody line in standard notation and then building a chord for each note of the song based on intervals.

The reality is that playing a folk instrument at even a basic level requires mastering an almost insurmountable number of skills and concepts. If you try to learn it all at once there is almost no way for your brain to process everything into a usable format.

In order to develop these skills and concepts into a usable format you have to treat learning as a process. Instead of memorization you have to go a route of familiarization.

The only way to familiarize yourself with the music making process is to:

Play simply, get together with as many musicians from as broad a range of backgrounds as possible and start teaching things like the basic frailing strum to beginners in your neck of the woods. Have faith in the craft and let the learning process happen as it needs to happen.

Easy answer or complicated answer. In the end we wind up walking the same path.

-Patrick

12/27/06

Fender Bender

Jeremy Writes:

Hi Pat and Patrick

My name is Jeremy and I am from Ontario Canada. I am 25 and just starting to practice the banjo, I have been playing guitar since I was a child.

I have a question concerning my banjo, I just purchased my first banjo, a fender b-54 and I know it doesn't have a tone ring. I am wondering if it is possible to put one in, I am thinking about making the banjo sound a bit better as I progress. Also any other tips you could give me on improving the sound of the instrument (besides just in my ability to play the instrument well) and being cost efficient would be greatly appreciated.

I have been watching all of Patrick's lessons and practicing very adamantly not only on the banjo but learning some new skills on the guitar as well, I would really like to thank you guys for all of your help, not only with the music but also your outlook on learning and how music can make you a better person.

If I recall correctly, the Fender B54 is made out of aluminium . . . I mean aluminium . . . the rim is made out of metal.

I wish I knew how to spell aluminum.

With a metal-rim banjo you really can't add a tone ring, but there is a really simple trick you can use to improve the sound of the instrument.

Parts required:

- 1 short strip of adhesive tape
- 1 cotton ball
- Some kind of wrench to tighten your bracket hooks.

Follow these steps:

- 1.) Take the resonator off your banjo.
- 2.) Reach inside your banjo pot, run your hand on the underside of your banjo head and see if you can feel the feet of your bridge pushing down the head. If the feet of your bridge are really pushing the head down go ahead and tighten your banjo head up a bit. Use a back and forth pattern. For example, tighten the bracket on the right side of the banjo neck and then tighten the bracket on the left side of your tailpiece. Don't try to tighten it all down at once. Just half a turn. Follow that pattern all the way around until you can just barely feel the bridge pushing down the banjo head.
- 3.) Reach inside the banjo pot again and place the cotton ball so that it is under the center foot of your banjo bridge. Use the strip of adhesive tape to hold it in place. Put your resonator back on and tune up your banjo.

It's a simple thing, but it can work wonders adding depth and warmth to metal-rim banjos.

The only other thing I would do with a metal rim banjo is pick up a Grover compensated bridge. You can get them cheap (I think I paid about \$5.00 for the one I'm using right now) and the stair-step design will give you a bit more control over the strings.

Other than that your best bet is not to mess with it too much.

It's A Sin

When we started billing ourselves as The God Knows We Tried String Band people here in Crisfield assumed that we were a gospel act. People would say, "They have to play gospel music. They got God in the name of the band, don't they?" and then go on to invite us to perform at a pot luck supper or some such thing expecting us to play songs like Rock Of Ages or The Old Rugged Cross in a church hall full of Methodists eating tuna casserole.

The problem was that we didn't know that much gospel music. When you grow up in an Irish Catholic household Protestant hymns are not something you hear all that often. Our idea of gospel music was stuff like I Saw The Light or almost bluegrass tempo versions of Uncloudy Day, When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder and Will The Circle Be Unbroken. The Methodists didn't know how to handle that much rhythm in their music, and more than one performance was interrupted by somebody getting up and witnessing.

The first time that happened I didn't quite know what to do. Dear old Dad and I were just sort of standing up there with our guitars and banjos wondering if we were supposed to leave or start playing some kind of rousing background music like Battle Hymn of the Republic to add some drama. It kind of upset the rest of the folks too because they already knew the stuff the penitent was witnessing about. Crisfield is the kind of town where everybody knows each other's business so the guy who was pouring out his heart and unburdening his soul wasn't really dishing out any news that hadn't already been discussed weeks ago over coffee at Gordon's Confectionary.

Sometimes the witnessing was kind of surreal. There was this one service that featured a preacher in a red wool suit (it was the hottest day of the year and the hall wasn't air-conditioned) talking about Barabbas, but he kept calling him Barnabus. "And they said, give us Bar-knee-bus!" Pop said that he was just trying to show everybody what hell was going to be like if we didn't all behave. I allowed as I was going to be good from that point on.

After a while the folks started inviting us to play our music rather than hymns. I felt kind of weird the first time we tried playing The Old Rugged Cross only to have somebody in the back row yell out, "Play You Dirty Old Egg Sucking Dog!" I glanced over to the preacher who nodded and said something about God having a sense of humor and to just go ahead and (sigh) play the song about dogs that (even deeper sigh) suck eggs.

After a while we just became part of the church scenery throughout town. Given that there are more than twenty churches in Crisfield that was an awful lot of pot-luck suppers. To this day I can't see Jell-O without breaking out into In The Garden. We were two Catholic folk musicians who didn't quite get the whole Protestant thing but were part of the family anyway. Every once in a while we would crank out our overdriven version of I Saw The Light, but after Miss Gladys (the head church lady) got up and hollered, "I can't listen to this. I'm not Church Of God, I'm a Methodist!" as she ran out of the room one evening we figured it would be best if we stuck to playing Folk and Honky-Tonk Country in the church halls.

We were invited one weekend to play with a traveling preacher from Tennessee and I while I was kind of hesitant after my past experiences with folks witnessing I figured, "what the heck?" and agreed to be part of the entertainment at the revival. The traveling preacher was this little guy with a big white beard who had this sort of vibe going with him that is really hard to describe. He really believed he was doing what he was put here to do and he honestly loved God. He preached like he was introducing people to his best friend. I know that might sound kind of hokey, but this guy was just cool.

The revival wasn't as much of a culture shock as I thought it would be. The evangelist knew how to preach in a way that wasn't too big on the fire and brimstone stuff and he was a pretty good guitar player.

By the time he was getting ready to move on to the next town I liked and respected the guy. He didn't even blink when people asked us to play You Dirty Old Egg Sucking Dog. He just played along with us and pointed out afterwards that God even loves egg-sucking dogs.

Right before he was getting ready to leave he complimented me on my guitar playing and I did what I almost always did back then. I went into to whole, "Aw, shucks, I'm not really that good" routine.

The next thing I knew the preacher turned on me just about as angry as I've ever seen anybody. He was jumping up and down and waving his guitar like he wanted to bonk me over the head. I was trying to figure out what I did or said to upset him while Dad was looking at me from across the room with that, "What have you gone and done now?" look when the preacher started talking.

"I gave you a compliment. I was trying to tell you how much I enjoyed playing the guitar with you and your dad and you have to turn around and insult me. How could you?" I started trying to say something but he was in full-blown Southern preacher mode. He wasn't talking angry anymore, it was worse than that. He was talking passionately like he really wanted me to understand this.

"False modesty isn't just a sin, Patrick. It's insulting. When somebody gives you a complement about your music that person is trying to say, 'hey, thank you for sharing with me!' and when you start that sandbagging routine you're telling that person that he's stupid, and even worse you're trying to get them to keep stroking your ego telling you how good you are. When a person comes over to compliment you they might want to ask you about something else, like as an icebreaker, to lead into maybe asking for help learning the guitar. If you love music so much would you want to drive that person away? Is it so hard just to accept the compliment like a man and say, Thank you?"

It was one of the few times in my life that I didn't have some kind of a snappy comeback. I just stood there and waited for him to catch his breath. After glowering at me for a moment he said, "You play very well, Patrick. I really enjoyed your music."

I grinned at him. "Why thank you, Pastor Charlie."

He shook my hand and said that there was hope for me yet.

Ever since then I have tried to avoid making the common guitar player's mistake of answering a compliment with the "aw shucks" routine. The amazing thing about it is that the preacher was right. Nine times out of ten the compliment really is an icebreaker. My honest and direct, "thank you" is usually the opening for the person to say how he'd always wanted to play the guitar or the banjo and I always wind up sitting down and going over the basics with him or her. I make a new friend, and I get to do what I love to do by sharing the licks and tricks I picked up from the cool old dudes with a new musician.

It's easy to do the false modesty thing. Sometimes it's hard to accept a compliment because people are, by nature, pretty bashful. Looking somebody in the eye and just saying thank you takes, as the preacher pointed out, a measure of character.

So when somebody tells you that you have done a good job, even when you are convinced otherwise, just smile and say, "Thank you." You'll probably make a new friend.

And if you ever hear You Dirty Old Egg Sucking Dog being played at a tent revival I guess Dear Old Dad and I are to blame.

Harmonica!

Matt writes:

I got your book on folk guitar (w/the free DVD) and am slowly getting some chords and strumming patterns going. In one of the videos, you mention to pick up a harmonica or two just to play with and work some melodies out on. I started looking around for some online, but got confused about the types and brands and stuff.

Seems like i would want a diatonic, but they range in price from the "way too cheap to be any good" to the "way too expensive for me to buy on my budget." Can you give me some recommendations?

Yippee! A harmonica question! I love harmonica questions!

About thirty years ago my mother gave me a harmonica as a Christmas present. When I pulled off the wrapping paper and held that Marine Band harp in my hand she told me that I could take it with me everywhere, and that if I always had music I would never be alone.

I've kept a harmonica close at hand ever since.

The harmonica is a strange instrument in some ways because it's not an instrument that you can teach like the banjo or guitar. Playing the harmonica is an extremely personal experience because it's just the harmonica, your lips and your breath. There are no moving parts and no need for callouses or agile hands. In fact, the only thing you need to play the harmonica is the ability to breathe.

John Steinbeck summed up the deal pretty well in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

"A Harmonica is easy to carry. Take it out of your hip pocket, knock it against your palm to shake out the dirt and pocket fuzz and bits of tobacco. Now it's ready. You can do anything with a harmonica: thin reedy single tone, or chords, or melody with rhythm chords. You can mold the music with curved hands, making it wail and cry like bagpipes, making it full and round like an organ, making it as sharp and bitter as the reed pipes of the hills. And you can play and put it back in your pocket. It is always with you, always in your pocket. And as you play, you learn new tricks, new ways to mold the tone with your hands, to pinch the tone with your lips, and no one teaches you. You feel around sometimes alone in the shade at noon, sometimes in the tent door after supper when the women are washing up. Your foot taps gently on the ground. Your eyebrows rise and fall in rhythm. And if you lose it or break it, why it's no great loss. You can buy another for a quarter."

They cost a bit more than a quarter now - which kind of sucks - but you don't have to break the bank to pick up a nice harmonica.

In order to know what to look for, it might help to know a little bit about what a harmonica is and how it works.

The harmonica we use for American folk music is the ten-hole Richter-tuned diatonic harmonica.

The harmonica is a free reed instrument. What that means is that a reed - a thin strip of material which vibrates to produce a sound - is attached at one end inside a close fitting frame. When air is passed through that frame the free end of the reed vibrates to create a tone. That tone is affected by the construction and mass of the reed - but it is also affected by the frame the reed is attached to and the force of air passing through the reed. Harmonica reeds are usually metal, but other free reed instruments can use reeds made of plastic or plant material such as bamboo. Free reeds work

one way. You can blow and draw air through the same hole in a harmonica and get different notes because every hole has two separate reeds.

The average diatonic harmonica is a pretty simple contraption. We have two plates with ten reeds each to give us twenty notes. Between the two reed plates we have a comb with ten holes so that we can blow or draw to each reed. That package is wrapped up with the cover-plate - which does nothing except keep our fingers from bending the reeds. Almost every diatonic harmonica you will come across is based on this setup - but prices can vary wildly between brands and models.

Part of the differences in price is based on construction, but there is a point where the pricing just starts to become a silly play on the, "if it costs more it must be better" mindset that some folks get when they shop for instruments.

In the \$15 to \$20 range, you have a wide selection of great harmonicas. The main differences boil down to construction and materials. Some harmonicas like the Marine Band or Blues Harp, both made by Hohner, have wooden combs. Other harmonicas like the Special 20 or Golden Melody, again made by Hohner, have plastic combs. In some ways that seems like a pretty small difference until you play a few of each brand. Wooden comb harps have a lovely playing feel to them, but after drooling into a Marine Band for a while the wood can swell up and slightly - I do mean slightly - change the way the instrument responds. Plastic comb harps are always the same, but the tone is a little bit brighter than wood.

Huang makes harmonicas that are almost identical to the Hohner instruments for a lower price. For example, the Hohner Special 20 (one of my favorites) will run you somewhere around \$17.00 while the Huang Silvertone can be picked up in some stores for around \$8.00.

Bushman is making some nice harps and Suzuki is making some really nice affordable harmonicas along with some pretty amazing high-end instruments. Lee Oskar harmonicas are a bit more expensive, but they play really nice.

Some harmonicas also have metal combs. My all-time favorite harmonica is the Hohner Meisterklasse. I've had a G Meisterklasse since the 1980's and it's a freaking wonderful harp. The metal comb makes the instrument darn near bulletproof and it sounds, to me at least, a bit more powerful over my resonophonic guitar.

To sum it up, if you shop around you can get a nice harmonica in your price range. Every brand has its unique touches, but in the end they all are just two reed plates separated by a comb. Don' agonize too much on the cost, just get what you can and start making music.

Now, a diatonic harmonica is meant to be played in one key - but in blues harp we can force a harp to play in other keys. So if you play the banjo you would want a G harp, but you would also want to pick up a C harp because in blues harp - or second position playing - we play an approximation of the G blues scale on a C harmonica.

Harp key: **A** also gives you: **E** in cross harp.

Harp key: **Bb** also gives you: **F** in cross harp.

Harp key: **B** also gives you: **F#** in cross harp.

Harp key: **C** also gives you: **G** in cross harp.

Harp key: **Db** also gives you: **G#** in cross harp.

Harp key: **D** also gives you: **A** in cross harp.

Harp key: **Eb** also gives you: **Bb** in cross harp.

Harp key: **E** also gives you: **B** in cross harp.

Harp key: **F** also gives you: **C** in cross harp.

Harp key: **F#** also gives you: **Db** in cross harp.

Harp key: **G** also gives you: **D** in cross harp.

Harp key: **G#** also gives you: **Eb** in cross harp.

So if you have a G harmonica you can play straight harp in the key of G and you can play cross harp in the key of D. With that in mind you can pick up a few cheap harmonicas and be able to jam in a lot of different keys. I try to keep the keys of A, D, C and G in my gig bag.

Sometime in the next few months I'll be starting up some harmonica workshops here on howandtao.com - it won't be quite as structured as our work with the banjo and guitar, but we can have some fun and throw some ideas your way. We'll also go into harp choices in a bit more detail. Until then, just follow John Steinbeck's tip and keep in mind that, "as you play, you learn new tricks, new ways to mold the tone with your hands, to pinch the tone with your lips, and no one teaches you."

-Patrick

12/7/06

High on a Mountaintop

Dave in Canada writes:

I have been skulking around your site for the last year or more, actually ever since I stumbled across your original 8 online lessons.

These were a revelation for me I had been playing for well over a year and knew what I wanted but not where to find it. I spent a lot of time studying Ken P./Dwight D./Miles K. material but finally found what I liked in your style. The basic question here is that after a year plus I seem stuck in a rut I don't feel like I am advancing or my playing is improving I have gone back to the basic strum and double checked my technique but I still feel that when I hear myself play a song it sounds nothing like when I hear others play the same song. What can I do to move forward? I don't have online recording capabilities but do you still accept a cassette to critique.

The odds are pretty good that you're not in a rut. You're on a plateau. That might seem like a trivial distinction at first glance, but plateaus are part and parcel with progress. We are not wired for constant and unyielding improvement so every now and then our creative engines sort of go on the fritz. Every so often our upward progress levels out and we end up at a scenic overlook where everything looks, sounds and feels the same.

Ruts are comfortable. When you get stuck in a rut it feels fine until somebody comes along and makes an issue out of it.

Plateaus are uncomfortable. As soon as you hit a plateau you want off of it. Sometimes the rush to break free of that plateau ends up wreaking serious havoc. Take a look at any Internet banjo forum and you'll see countless people trying to play five different styles on fifteen different banjos. In almost every case the person in question hit a plateau, changed directions to break free, ended up on another plateau and is in a constant cycle of starting and stopping. Always wanting to play but never settling down long enough to stick through the tough spots.

Getting off a plateau is not usually a matter of technique because technique is what gets you stuck on a plateau in the first place. No, getting off a plateau is usually a matter of forgetting technique - and that is a tricky thing because it's not something you do as much as it is something that happens to you.

Every time I have been stuck at a plateau some crazy sort of life-changing event has come along and knocked me off of it. Sometimes it was a big moment like what happened to me at the hospital all those years ago and sometimes it was something small like a couple of words of advice from an old guitar player. In every case it was never something I was looking for. I would be wandering along and, BLAMO! Suddenly I was looking at my craft, and sometimes the whole world, from a different angle.

My advice is to look at your current situation as a sign that you are ready for something to happen. What that something is going to be is anybody's guess - and there is no guarantee that your moment of inspiration will have anything to do with the banjo. Sometimes the best way to understand your particular discipline is to gain insight from a completely different field. Weaving, painting, bricklaying, dancing, accounting - it's all different on one level, but from another angle it's all the same because. It boils down to dedicating yourself to an art form - a discipline - and with that in mind you can learn something about your craft from everybody you meet.

Get out into your community. Just sort of wander around with your banjo with no particular goal in mind. After a while something will happen. Somebody will share something with you or point something out, sometimes unintentionally, that sets off a chain reaction of ideas in your head like a Mentos candy dropped into a bottle of Diet Coke. You will find yourself trying new things and progressing at an almost frightening pace.

Then you'll hit another plateau and things will come to a crashing halt for a little while.

When that happens just go back out and wander around some more.

As for sounding like somebody else, the only thing I'd worry about there is whether or not you are making musical sense. There are countless ways to play any given song. If you stay true to the structure of the tune things will usually work out. Even when it doesn't work out the results will probably be interesting.

Heck, sounding like you is what this is all about anyway.

You might also want to browse through *A Book Of Five Strings* for some ideas to mess around with. Sometimes just playing around with a banjo riff can knock your gears back into motion.

Whatever you do, keep in mind that you've been at this for a fairly short time. Stick with it and you will get off of this plateau and start moving forward again . . . at least until you hit the next plateau.

-Patrick

12/18/06

I Sing the Banjo Electric

Paul from . . . he didn't say where he was from . . . I've got to put something here so I'll make something up.

Paul the banjo-playing man of mystery writes:

Dear Patrick and Dad, I have been playing for two years and I have a question about lack of volume. I play an old Supertone with a skin head and light gage strings. On many ballad type songs I use a three finger style with no picks and sing along.

This works fine at home but I've been playing and singing at church (well received and a lot of fun) but I know the banjo is way too quiet. I tend to move around a bit so staying still in front of a mike won't work. They have cheapo transducers on eBay would this work??

A cheap stick-on transducer can get you an amplified banjo sound (and the good or bad of that depends on your viewpoint) but there is more at play here than just the pickup. You have to think about what you are going to plug into - and church PA systems can be curious beasts. If you go that route be prepared for some trial and error until you come up with a setup that you like. You may have to ask for permission to go into the church between services to play around with the sound system.

I have never had much luck with banjo pickups. I had a Fishman pickup custom installed on an old banjo when I was in high school. The folks at Fishman were nice enough to help me adapt the mounting brackets to fit the dowel-stick and we drilled the pot to mount the jack so this puppy looked pretty cool, but it never sounded all that great. I messed with it for years until I realized that I was trying to force an instrument that produced sound by moving air into an instrument that converted vibrations into an electronic signal. As a result it was never going to sound or respond quite like a banjo.

The other downside was that I kept tripping over the cable.

I ended up trading my electrified banjo for a Guild guitar. I loved that Guild guitar - which is saying something because I usually flat-out refuse to put down my resophonic guitar to play a standard acoustic - but this guitar was just sweet. The problem was that it was cursed. It was such a nice guitar that people kept asking to play it and every person that laid hands on it ended up doing something nasty to it. There was this one guy who borrowed it to play one song on stage. Just one song. What could go wrong, right? Well, this guy started whamming on that Guild with a flatpick and carved chunks out of the soundhole. I'm standing backstage literally watching sawdust and chunks of wood flying out of my guitar. I took it in for repairs and it came back from the shop in even worse shape! By the time I gave up and sold it that poor guitar looked like something from a cheap horror movie . . .

Sorry about that. Got off on a tangent for a moment there. That Guild just brings back so many bad memories.

I guess the moral of that particular story is never let anybody play your guitar.
Not even your momma. Not even on her birthday.

Where was I? Oh yeah, for fifteen or twenty bucks a stick-on transducer is worth a shot. If you like the sound and it works in your church your problem is solved. If you don't like the sound there are other options you can try out.

Every time Dear Old Dad and I do a television appearance somewhere we almost always wind up using tie-tack microphones to pick up our instruments and voices. The sound isn't as great as you would get with a pair of standard microphones, but it's never been all that bad either. A wireless clip-on microphone setup can be picked up pretty cheaply nowadays, and in a church setting they work reasonably well because the audience is hearing a mix of the live

sound and the PA system ends up acting as a reinforcement. The only trick is placing the microphone so that it can pick up your banjo and your voice. I usually clip them onto my strap.

Another option is to mount a microphone on or inside the banjo. I've run into a few players over the years who swear by old Radio Shack PZM microphones. They are funny looking gadgets - a flat square of metal intended to be laid flat on a table to pick up the field around your head - but when you strap one to a dowel stick or coordinator rod they can sound really nice.

Another thing to keep in mind is that big halls like churches can play funny tricks on how you hear your instrument. I've been in places where the room just felt acoustically dead and I was sure that nobody could hear me, but when I talked to folks in the audience they all told me I was playing too loud. Before you start going crazy with sound reinforcement it might be a good idea to talk to the folks in your congregation to see what they have to say about your volume concerns.

In your experimentation, don't forget to at least try using a set of picks. Like it or not, the simple answer is usually the way to go.

-Patrick

12/25/06

Why Do People Quit

There is one inescapable fact about learning to play a fretted instrument. It's not easy. Over the years I have met a lot of people who started to play and gave up. They came to believe that learning the banjo, guitar or mandolin requires some special talent or gift that they lack. Patrick and I have managed to help a lot of these folks but far too many walked away without ever giving music a chance.

The one trait that most of the quitters have in common is a lack of patience. They see a journeyman musician perform and they want to do the same. They buy a banjo, guitar or mandolin along with a book and maybe a video. Some even sign up for lessons at the local music store. A few find their way to the local expert who gives lessons in his or her home. After all this they still quit. The instrument is sold on an Internet auction or dumped in a closet never to be touched again. What happened?

Basically they put the cart before the horse. These folks wanted to be something without becoming something. They see the end result of countless practice hours and years of musical interaction and they want that right now. Guys, it just don't work that way. Remember, music is made by applying and combining many techniques and skills. You have to consider timing, rhythm, tempo and melody. You must understand and apply the basics of music theory. Your left and right hands have to work independently of each other. In short, you must be able to communicate within the language of music. If you think that this happens quickly or easily you are just kidding yourself.

Take your time. What's the rush? Master the core skills. Enjoy the learning process. It is very important to be patient while you pursue the dream of becoming a musician. Don't compare your progress or skill level with another individual or group. Don't worry if you find yourself on a learning plateau. You just have to work through it. Don't think that you can master this craft by talking about it or by watching someone play. You must practice and apply the core skills by interacting with other musicians. Every time you sit on your front porch and play for your family you get better. Every time you sit in on a jam session you get stronger. Whenever you share your knowledge about music, however limited, you gain confidence.

The trick here is to enjoy where you are while keeping your goal in perspective.

The progress may be so slow that you feel like you're standing still but that's the game. Don't fall into the trap of trying to imitate someone based on magazine articles or Internet chat rooms. If you do this without mastering the core musical skills you will become frustrated and most likely will quit. Just play whenever and wherever you can. Beware of easy solutions and foolproof quick learning methods. Take your time. Practice, play, share and experiment. Apply the basic skills along with some time and perseverance. Before you know it someone will look at you and say, "I wish I could play like that".

Pat Costello (Dear Old Dad)

2004

Twenty Years In Shady Grove

Joe in Ohio writes:

First, let me say that I love you guys. Your books and website are awesome and truly inspiring to someone who's struggling to learn how to play some simple back-porch, old-time music. So, here's a question: I learned to bum-ditty on my banjo fairly easily (I'm virtually new to banjo). Yea, its fun and people actually think I'm making music now!! -- a first for me after years of messing around with guitar, harmonica, fiddle, dulcimer -- you name it!! So what next? I got this "Shady Grove" groove thing going real good... and a few other old-time tunes too. But, honestly it's getting a little boring. Like I read someone say the other day -- 20 years of Cluck Old Hen will likely drive me nuts without being able to do something else with it. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say -- I love it, but I want to do more with it. Any suggestions? Remember, I just a beginner. Thanks Patrick -- best to you and Dear Old Dad!!

This is a sorta-kinda tough question to answer because I can't completely relate to the problem. I know there are people who collect tunes one at a time like bubblegum cards, but my personal take on making music is a bit more dynamic.

The way I see it, there are to three basic ways to look at any given banjo tune:

A literal viewpoint - playing the tune exactly as written.

An abstract viewpoint - treating the tune as a musical outline that you can fill in.

The "big picture" viewpoint - looking at the structure of the tune in terms of general musical concepts.

The tricky part here is that no one viewpoint is any better or worse than the other. At some point we have to be able to work in terms of literal, abstract and "big picture" contexts. The literal view is great for working on specific licks, the abstract view is great for building up your improvisation skills and the "big picture" view is great for jamming and transposing on the fly.

Let's take Shady Grove and look at it from those three viewpoints.

Right now you are working from a sort of literal viewpoint. You know a particular arrangement of the tune.

What version of Shady Grove are you playing? Is it the modal version where you play a chord progression that runs back and forth from Gsus to F?

Note: sawmill or G modal tuning is nothing more than tuning your banjo to an open G-suspended chord.

Or is it the minor-key version of Shady Grove where you play, in open G tuning, Em, D and G?

Those are just two variations of the tune. There are hundreds of other possible arrangements - and as soon as you start exploring different ways to approach Shady Grove your viewpoint starts to become more abstract. Instead of just playing the notes you are beginning to mess around with the structure of the song. The next logical step is to start coming up with your own licks to stuff into the measures.

As you are playing around with Shady Grove start looking at what the tune has in common with other songs. To get you started, what does the modal version of Shady Grove have in common with Little Sadie, Cluck Old Hen, Little Maggie, Cold Frosty Morning, High on A Mountaintop, Tennessee Stud and countless other tunes? What does the minor key version have in common with Wayfaring Stranger, What Will We Do With Drunken Sailor?, Star of the County Down, Come Oh Come Emmanuel and countless other tunes?

What happens when you change the key of the tune? Sure, the fingering changes, but is anything else really changing?

Once you start looking at tunes from an abstract viewpoint the next logical step is to look at the big picture. From that viewpoint learning one song gives us the keys to learn a thousand other songs.

When you approach the craft from that angle it's darn near impossible to get stuck in Shady Grove for too long. Everything you learn opens up a whole world of possibilities until you get to the point where you just pick up the banjo, guitar or anything else and play without having to go back and learn a song note-by-note.

Then you'll find yourself looking at techniques in the same light. For example, how is the basic frailing strum like the Carter strum?

It won't happen all at once. You have to spend some time looking at things literally to get your technique down. Songs like While House Blues, Wildwood Flower, Rosin The Beau and even Shady Grove are great tools to use for practice - but at some point you have to make the jump from practice to application.

-Patrick

12/15/06

It goes like this. No, it goes like this

Mike wrote an interesting comment to an earlier post:

One problem over here (in the UK) is many of the song/tune melodies are not commonly known. What would be handy is a podcast of you just plain singing/playing one verse/chorus of everything.

I have thought about doing that, but it would probably stir up more questions than answers because folk songs are tricky little devils to pin down. Anything I record would be met with people shouting that they play and/or sing a different arrangement of the song.

For example, with a song like Shady Grove you will meet folks who play it in what they call a modal setting where you run from Gsus to F and at the next jam somebody will want to play it in a minor key where you run from Em to G. Both are right, and neither accounts for all of the possible versions of the song.

When I was just starting out a friend of mine introduced me to Elizabeth Cotten. I had no clue who she was at the time, but she played a few songs on my friend's banjo and gave me a some pointers. One of the songs she played for me sounded a bit like Freight Train, but it wasn't anything like the version of the song I had heard other people playing. When I mentioned that odd sounding version of Freight Train to my friend later on he rolled his eyes and told me that it was her song. That's when it hit me who the cool old lady was - and that's when it hit me that everybody hears, feels, sings, plays and lives a song differently.

You see, folk music is all about personal interpretation and improvisation. As musicians we have a set of agreed upon concepts we use called music theory that allows us to communicate ideas with each other. For example, 4/4 time is always going to have four beats to a measure. Other than that everything else is up for grabs. It's up to the individual to come up with an arrangement that works for him or her - but at the same time that arrangement has to make musical sense so other people can play along.

At first glance the idea of improvising within a structure can seem counter-intuitive, but it makes things a lot easier because our choices are limited. It's kind of like driving a car. You can go anywhere you want as long as you stay on the road. When I was a kid I was always running across songs in books that I had never heard before. When that would happen I could either wait to find a cool old dude who knew the song - which could take months or even years (and nine times out of ten the old buzzard would cuff me upside the head and tell me to figure it out for myself) - or I could figure out the song on my own.

Figuring things out on my own wasn't so hard once somebody, I forget who, pointed out that the lyrics are poetry. The words have a rhythm to them.

Take a look at this old limerick:

*A flea and a fly in a flue Were caught,
so what could they do?
Said the fly, Let us flee.
Let us fly, said the flea.
So they flew through a flaw in the flue.*

There is a rhythm to limericks. It's actually hard not to tap your foot as you say them aloud.

Even serious poetry can have that sort of rhythmic pulse. It's just a bit more subtle.

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.
~Robert Frost*

In Nothing Gold Can Stay frost uses rhyming to keep the rhythmic flow of the words running through the lines. Emily Dickenson used a similar technique, but she also made the mistake of using the same rhythmic pattern over and over again so the brilliance of her words is lost once you realize that everything she wrote can be sung to The Yellow Rose Of Texas.

*If you were coming in the fall,
I'd brush the summer by?
With half a smile and half a spurn,
As housewives do a fly.
~Emily Dickenson*

*There's a yellow rose of Texas,
I am going for to see
She loves no other fellow,
her heart belongs to me.*

Once you start digging around you'll find that a lot of great poems carry the same rhythmic structure as folk songs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner can be sung to Yankee Doodle, Edgar Allan Poe's The Raven can be sung to Deck The Halls, Robert Frost's Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening can be sung to When The Saints Go Marching In and Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky can be sung to Greensleeves.

My point here is that song lyrics have a rhythmic structure to them.

Read though this a few times:

*Did you ever hear tell of sweet Betsy from Pike
who crossed the wide prairie with her lover Ike?
With two yoke of oxen and a one-spotted hog.
A tall Shanghai rooster and an old yeller dog.*

Now read it aloud and pay attention to the syllables.

Now clap your hands in a 3/4 rhythm (3/4 is three-four time where every measure of music has three beats with a quarter note value - so our count is one two three) and read it aloud again.

Now, in 3/4 time the first beat gets the accent. ONE two three. Read though the lyric again and accent that first beat.

If you mess around with it a little bit you will start to get a feeling for the rhythmic flow of the song. It might not be exact - but it's enough to work with.

Now grab your banjo, guitar, mandolin or whatever and read the lyric aloud while stressing that first beat and strumming the chord changes below:

C.....G.....C
Did you ever hear tell of sweet Betsy from Pike
.....G
who crossed the wide prairie with her lover Ike?
.....F.....C.....F.....C
With two yoke of oxen and a one-spotted hog
.....G.....C
A tall Shanghai rooster and an old yeller dog.

Now listen to the chord changes and change the way you read the lyric to match the chords.

Now sing the song and keep a steady rhythm with you banjo, guitar or whatever.

If you work with it for a while the chord progression and the rhythm of the lyrics will start to come together in your head to form a melody.

Start singing that melody.

It won't be easy at first, but after a while things will click and a couple of lines of lyrics will say about as much to you as fifty pages of sheet music. The rhythm of the words will start to imply melodies in your mind - and if you start to jam with people you'll be able to start changing how and what you play in a song to fit into the group because you view of music will be pretty abstract.

Being a musician isn't just a matter of fingering notes. Anybody can memorize a line of tab, but it takes a musician to turn a few words into a song.

For more lyrics - and even some midi files of melody lines - mudcat.org is the best place to visit. Just don't get too wrapped up in the melody. Teach yourself to feel the rhythm in the lyrics and teach yourself to listen to the chord progressions.

And no, nobody is born knowing how to do this. It's just a matter of training.

Go sing.

-Patrick

11/29/06

Buying Your First Resophonic Guitar

Dear Old Dad and I are selling affordable banjos and guitars now, but that doesn't change the advice presented in this article. If you can find a cheap guitar, play the daylights out of it. If you can't find one, give us a call.

-Patrick

Ever since I posted the first Subway Shuffle video workshop (<http://www.archive.org/details/subway.shuffle>) people have been asking me about my guitar.

Well, it's a Dobro 33-H, but as much as I love the thing the brand name really isn't important. All you really need to know if you are looking for this type of guitar is that it's a resophonic guitar.

I honestly think resophonics are the best all-around choice for anybody starting out in folk guitar, so in this Cheap Thrills post we are going to talk about what to look for in an affordable instrument.

The first resophonic guitar I ever saw was played by a cool old dude named Tiny.

Tiny was anything but that. He would tower over me with a cloud of cigar smoke swirling around his head and his meaty arms crossed over his beat up National like some kind of ancient country guitar wizard.

Of all the guitar players I knew as a kid, Tiny still stands out the clearest in my memory. I only played with him a handful of times but he was always willing to help me figure out whatever I was having trouble with. He had to phrase his words around the stogie he kept tucked in the corner of his mouth. He was also prone to poking me in the chest when emphasizing a musical point.

I dedicated The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo to Tiny. That should give you a pretty good idea of just how much the old guy meant to me.

Tiny's guitar was an old National single cone from the late twenties or early thirties. Tiny had bought it new. It was beat up, corroded and worn out in all of the right places. I thought it was the coolest thing in the world.

Not too long after I got to know Tiny I spotted a broken guitar in the trash. I took it home, put it back together with duct tape and started trying to teach myself how to play it. When Dear Old Dad realized that I was serious about playing the guitar he took me up to New York. We walked into a big guitar shop and he told me to pick a guitar.

In one of the back rooms of the shop there was a new Dobro 33H. It was similar to Tiny's guitar, but it was bigger, shinier and generally more bodacious than the old National.

As soon as I laid eyes on it I fell head over heels in love.

I pulled it down off the wall, strummed a chord and I was never quite the same. That was my introduction to the wonderful world of resophonic guitars, and to this day that 33-H is my only guitar except for the 33-D that I keep as an emergency back-up.

When I bought my guitar I didn't know anything about this type of instrument other than the fact that Tiny played an old one. That said, Tiny didn't influence my decision that much. I picked that guitar simply because it felt right. I found out, sometimes the hard way, that there are a lot of misconceptions concerning what these guitars are for and what they can do.

So what is a resophonic guitar?

The concept of resophonic guitars came about in the 1920s. Instrument makers of every stripe were looking for an amplification system - and since the electronic age was still in its infancy a lot of experiments revolved around the search for a mechanical answer to the problem.

A guy named John Dopyera came up with the idea of taking something like the old mica disks used as mechanical amplifiers under the turntable of Victrolas and sticking them into a guitar. John wasn't the only person thinking along these lines. It turns out that a lot of people might have had the same idea at the same time because other folks applied for similar patents around this time, but John was the first to really make it work and he got his guitar into production and out to customers first.

Anyway, Dopyera and his brothers experimented with the idea and came up with an aluminum cone that could be placed inside the body of a guitar to pick up the vibration of the guitar strings. Eventually several configurations of aluminum cones were designed. The tricone system used three small cones. The spider bridge used one large inverted cone and the bisquit bridge used one large cone with a wooden bridge on top.

In any of these setups you end up with one or more aluminum cones reflecting the vibration of the strings. This creates a sort of directional effect that more or less creates the illusion of volume. The cone acts more like a megaphone than a pickup.

The first resophonic instruments were squareneck guitars designed for playing across your lap Hawaiian style. It wasn't long before they started making regular roundneck guitars. Then they started producing mandolins, tenor guitars and tenor banjos. There were even a few resophonic violins made.

So what makes a resophonic guitar different from a standard flattop guitar?

In a standard acoustic guitar the string vibrations are transmitted through the top of the guitar. This is problematic because the top of the guitar has to be braced in order to withstand the tension of steel strings. Building a great acoustic guitar requires finding a balance between bracing against collapse from the tension of the strings and letting the top of the guitar vibrate freely enough to transmit sound.

On a resophonic guitar all of the work is being done by the cone (or cones) so the body of the instrument can be overbuilt from heavy plywood or sheet metal. The body of a resophonic guitar functions like speaker cabinet. This means that you can make a great guitar without a lot of engineering or expensive tone woods. That's an important thing to understand when you are shopping on a budget.

There are several companies in America and Europe making new high-end instruments today. There are also small shops knocking out custom guitars. These are really nice instruments, but prices start around a thousand dollars and go up from there.

Be careful with vintage guitars. Old resophonic instruments have a certain kind of mojo about them, but it's really easy to buy a pig in a poke if you don't know what to look for.

Shoot, back in the 1980s there was news on the grapevine about a crew in Pennsylvania counterfeiting old resophonic guitars. These guys would take an old low-end instrument, glue on a phony headstock decal, toss in a few parts and sell it at a flea market or a farmers market as a vintage high-end guitar.

If you must have an old resophonic guitar, shop at a reputable dealer (I have heard good things about www.vintagenationals.com) and be prepared to pay a premium. A grungy old steel-body guitar from the 1930s or 30s has two separate factors affecting value. These are fairly rare guitars, but there is a secondary value in terms of mojo.

People will pay extra to own an instrument connected to the golden age of blues guitar. They will pay even more for a guitar that has battle scars from a lifetime of hard living.

Even if you do find a quality vintage guitar at a good price you might still run into trouble. A lot of vintage models do not have adjustable truss rods so a warped neck can result in an expensive repair. If the blocks supporting the neck inside the guitar come loose the neck will pull forward and require a fairly pricey reset.

If you're looking to get that resophonic vibe on a budget your best bet is to start looking closely at instruments imported from Asia.

The quality of Asian made musical instruments in general has been improving by leaps and bounds over the last few years and resophonic guitars are no exception.

Wood-body resophonic guitars from Asia are probably the most affordable. These are marketed under several brands but they all share the same basic features. You can pick up one of these guitars new for as low as \$290.00 and even less on the used market.

Metal-body guitars from the Pacific rim run from \$400.00 to \$900.00. You'll find guitars made of brass or steel - and in some cases German silver. Finish colors range from polished nickel to a wide range of powder coat colors.

The quality of the imported resophonic guitars I have played has been surprisingly good. Sometimes you'll find a neck that has a fret sticking out a hair from the edge of the fretboard but for the price of the guitar that's a pretty simple thing to fix.

The cool thing about these guitars is that they are easy to upgrade. They play pretty well out of the box, but for around sixty dollars you can replace the cone and suddenly you'll have something that comes close to instruments costing three times as much. You can find some tips on upgrading these guitars, as well as some easy tweaks at Stewart MacDonald.

Setting up these guitars is a matter of personal preference, but I have found that my guitar responds best if I treat it like an electric guitar. That makes sense when you look at the cone as a mechanical amplification system. I have light gauge strings and a low action on my guitar. It's easy to play, loud when it needs to be and it sounds great.

So for under three hundred dollars you can be playing a resophonic guitar. That's pretty exciting, but the next question people always ask me is if they have to change the way they play to suit these guitars.

The answer is yes and no.

In a lot of ways these are just responsive guitars with a lot of volume and good sustain but they do respond differently than standard flattop guitars. On a well setup resophonic guitar everything you do is being picked up by the cone and projected out so they do tend to be less forgiving in some ways - but that's actually a good thing because it forces you to play cleanly with an eye towards good technique.

Like any guitar, what you get out of it depends on what you put into it.

Once you get your resophonic guitar you will get a lot of setup tips from slide guitar players. This is a good thing if you play slide, but a really bad thing if you want to play straight guitar.

The notion that resophonics are only for slide is a little wonky anyway. These guitars are not better suited to one task than another. Tiny played his old National with a flatpick. I play my old Dobro 33-H (I've been playing this guitar for twenty-five years so I guess it classifies as old) fingerstyle. Tiny sounded like Tiny and I sound like Patrick. When you get your guitar be aware that no matter what you do you are always going to sound like you. Resophonic guitars don't just

pick up and throw the vibrations of the guitar strings. They have a funny way of projecting the personality of the person playing. Once you get familiar with one of these guitars you will find that they can take you wherever you want to go. That's an important thing to understand nowadays when so many performers only seem to drag out a resophonic on stage as a prop for one or two songs.

A resophonic is a great choice for an all-around guitar. After all of these years I still haven't found myself in a situation where my 33-H couldn't do the job.

My whole guitar journey has been associated with these instruments. The funky acoustic properties of my guitar gave me something to work with when my hearing started going south. The weight of my guitar forced me to ditch the case and wander around Philadelphia with it strapped across my back and the sight of a kid with a chrome-plated guitar over his shoulder sparked more than a few musical adventures. That gleam of chrome brings back memories of jamming in the summer sun with cool old dudes. The ringing tone reminds me of the fact that my father believed in me enough to buy me this guitar. The wear on the neck reminds me of just how far I've come over the years.

And let's be honest, for all the good stuff they bring to the table in terms of playability, these guitars just look cool.

-Patrick

2004

Magnum Fever

I used to shoot a lot. My two favorite guns were a Pennsylvania flintlock rifle and a Colt .45 auto Combat Commander. I chose the rifle because flintlocks are difficult critters to master. I chose the Colt because it is the best handgun in terms of power, reliability and accuracy. I got real good with both of these firearms because I practiced a lot and I enjoyed shooting. The rifle was used for hunting and target shooting. The automatic was strictly for business. I was licensed to carry and I took that responsibility very seriously. The basic skills needed to master each of these weapons were completely interchangeable. Once you get past the two hundred year technology gap it all comes down to sight alignment, sight picture, trigger squeeze and follow through.

I belonged to a gun club in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania. We had regular events that featured various tests of marksmanship. The club had a lot of members so it was inevitable that some of the competitions got really interesting. Like the day the guys with the scoped high-powered rifles looked at our flintlocks and just had to mouth off about how we should get some real guns. The same sort of things happened on the pistol range. There was always a Dirty Harry clone toting a fire-belching magnum chiding me about my obsolete .45 Colt.

I really liked these fellows. They all tasted like chicken.

We let them talk their way into challenging us to a shooting match. Since they made the challenge we got to set the rules. Rifles were at one hundred yards offhand with no slings. Pistols were at fifty yards standing only. Guess what? We never lost. Not once, not ever. The guys with the magnums could not even come close to equaling our marksmanship. The reason is very simple. We could shoot and they could not. They really believed that their choice of ordinance gave them an edge. It was a pleasure to take them to school. Their super powerful firearms were of no use to them in these matches because these guys could only shoot accurately from a sandbagged shooting bench. Real life seldom furnishes such comforts. They bought these expensive and overpowered guns because the "experts" writing for shooting magazines promised them that the magnum of the month would solve all their problems and make them the envy of the scene. All the focus was on muzzle velocity, trajectory and comparisons to "pre-64 or "pre-war" models of various makers. No one bothered to tell them that none of this matters if you cannot hit what you aim at.

The same sort of mindset is prevalent in music. Go to any festival or jam session and you will see hopeless cases of magnum fever in the form of very expensive banjos and guitars carried by people who can't play a lick. They bought these instruments because some writer or expert convinced them that this was their ticket to instant musicianship. Nonsense phrases like "authentic old time sound", "real pre-war tone" or "exotic tone woods" are often combined with subtle assurances that you can substitute hardware for hard work.

It's always sad to see expensive instruments mangled by people with chump-change skill. Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against high-end stuff. There are many fine examples of handcrafted, highly decorated guitars and banjos out there. I have always advised people to buy the very best they can reasonably afford, preferably from a local acoustic music shop.

The real problem is a lack of basic skills. The guys at the gun club wanted to be hip and look cool so they bought firearms that they did not understand and could not control. The idea of applying basic marksmanship never entered their minds so they were made to look foolish by real marksmen. The folks who hope to impress us with their "banjo or guitar of the month" choice of instruments often make the same mistake. All we can do is look at them and shake our heads. They are completely lost around real musicians. These folks believe that their "magnum" instrument and the ability to play a handful of tunes memorized from tablature is all they need.

I really like these guys. They all taste like chicken.

Remember, you cannot skip over the hard stuff. The basic skills must be mastered and applied. You cannot buy your chops. You cannot learn about music by reading magazines, visiting forums or playing from tablature. Get grounded in rhythm and timing. Work on playing and singing. Know your chord inversions and the scales that are always within a finger's reach. Make your favorite instrument your best friend and it will never let you down. Play everywhere and with everyone you can. Don't become a victim of magnum fever. Pick up that expensive instrument and learn with it.

Have fun, ask questions and make mistakes. Just don't expect anyone who knows oatmeal from mashed potatoes to be impressed until you can do something other than polish it.

More later. Until then, don't step in anything soft.

Pat (Dear Old Dad) Costello

2006

Nobody's Fault But Yours

Paul, who asked earlier about banjo pickups, writes:

Dear Patrick and Pat, I enjoy your live answer pod cast....it reminds me of an old time radio show (this is a compliment!) You reminded me of that old episode of the Twilight Zone where you could go to the store and buy a robot Grandma. Anyway two questions

1. Could you do a little play along of "No Bodies Fault But Mine" by Blind Willie Johnson

2. What do you think about nylon strings? I am trying them and it seems to help me as I can bang the heck out of the banjo and still have nails.

p.s. I am from Monroe, Ct.

Hmmm . . . I've never played Nobody's Fault But Mine on the banjo - but there isn't any reason why it wouldn't make a cool banjo tune.

I dug out my copy of The Complete Blind Willie Johnson, figured out the tune for myself, simplified it for basic frailing and knocked out a quick audio file for you.

You can tune in to the file here: <http://www.archive.org/details/frailing.blues>

As for nylon strings . . . well, what I think isn't the issue here. It's your banjo. If you're happy then run with it.

-Patrick

1/10/07

Making the most out of what you've got

Dave in Colorado writes:

Patrick, Love your work. I have had a lot of success with your frailing banjo methods. Playing at it for longer than I care to admit. Look at your guitar workshops. This is where my question comes in. I have an old Yamaha classical guitar I inherited and the finger board is quite wide. So wide I cannot get the thumb onto the bass string when I make an "F" chord. in a case like that do you just not play the 6th string?

The "sixth-string-thumb-wraparound-thing" in folk guitar has always made classical guitarists queasy. I don't think it's anything to do with technique as much as the types of guitars being used. A steel-string acoustic guitar usually has an arched fingerboard while a nylon-string or classical guitar has a flat fingerboard. With an arched fingerboard you can get away with wrapping your thumb around the neck to catch the sixth string, but when you flatten out the fingerboard in a classical design the strings are laid out in a way that makes it almost impossible to wrap your thumb.

Instead of just ignoring the sixth string my advice would be to adapt your fretting technique in a way that makes full use of that flat, wide and wonderful fretboard you have. Instead of wrapping your thumb to catch the sixth string you will probably want to start messing around with what some players call the "grand barre" - laying your index finger across all six strings.

In order to do that you are going to have to change your posture and hand position.

Grab a chair with no arms and find something to use as a footstool. Sit up straight, hold your guitar on the same leg as your fretting hand and then use the footstool to prop up that leg. In other words, the opposite of how I'm sitting in the guitar videos. Now angle the guitar so that if you were facing a clock the headstock would be somewhere between ten and eleven o'clock.

Adjust things until you are comfortable and the guitar is fully supported.

Make sure that you don't have to hold up the guitar neck with your fretting hand.

To start making chords what you want to do is imagine a line drawn down the back of the neck of the guitar.

Place the pad of your thumb on that imaginary line and then lay your index finger across the first fret.

Here's where it gets tricky. You have to apply even pressure across all six strings with your index finger in a way that won't screw up your hand. Just like with steel-string guitar, doing that is going to require playing around with your posture and the position of the guitar until you find a way that fits your body. It can be done, but it will take a little bit of time.

If your hand starts to hurt stop, change things around and try again.

If you get frustrated stop, take a walk around the block and calm down before you try it again.

You may want to try a few different sets of guitar strings until you find a tension you like.

Once you can pull off a grand barre the rest of the F chord is pretty much the same. Nylon strings will give you a pretty cool sound. It will be a different sound than you get out of steel strings, but that's what makes it cool. Have fun exploring the differences and over time you will end up with a sound and a style that is unique to you.

If you want to experiment with some slide guitar playing keep in mind that nylon strings will react differently to a slide than steel strings. Instead of metal or glass designs, players are finding that bone or unglazed clay seems to work better with nylon strings. You can make your own nylon string slide out of an old soup bone or you can pick one up in a guitar store. BigHeart Slides is selling an unglazed porcelain slide they call the BoneyFinger and a few other makers are offering terracotta slides.

You can do it all on a nylon string guitar. Some things will be harder to pull off than they would on a steel-string guitar, but at the same time some things will be easier. It's just a matter of fooling around with things until you find a solution that works for

-Patrick

1/1/07

Do You Know How Lucky You Are?

Do you know how lucky you are?

I've heard that phrase many times over the past twenty-five years. Once a man walked up to my truck and said it while I was playing my Lowell Jacobs mountain banjo. Another time a very well known banjo player told Patrick the same thing about his ability to sing while playing. We hear a version of it almost every time we are doing something musical together. Sort of like we were a couple of hobo's who stumbled onto a bag of baloney sandwiches.

Well folks, that ain't the way it works. The ability to play, sing or work together with your son, daughter or spouse has absolutely nothing to do with luck. What seems like simple good fortune is actually the end result of a lot of work. Nothing worthwhile happens by luck. The guy at my truck window only had to accept my offer to teach him how to play. The famous banjo player simply never bothered to fully develop as a musician. The people who look at us and comment on our good fortune could easily change their luck if they wanted to.

The first thing you must do is practice. Get grounded in the basics of rhythm, timing and singing. Take whatever skill you have right now and start developing some chops. Get out and play anywhere and with anyone you can. Learn from these experiences. Stop whining that you are not good enough because that cop-out guarantees that you never will be. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by chat-room cowboys who are all hat and no cattle. They hide behind words like "traditional" or "acceptable" in order to intimidate you. Remember, music is a language. Once you master the core concepts you can play anything, anywhere with any other musician.

Frustrated beginners often ask us for advice about how to deal with family members who don't appreciate their music. Think about that for a minute. Music is not for appreciation or preservation (if it must be preserved it is already dead). Music has but one purpose, to entertain. Very few listeners give a hoot about a note for note banjo rendition of some obscure fiddle tune played with no rhythm, timing or skill. Most people, however, will respond to the simplest folk or blues song played and sung well. Listen to your friends and family. They are trying to tell you something. What sounds to you like some sort of an Appalachian masterpiece may come across to them as pointless noise.

The best way to change your luck is to take control of your situation. Practice the basics until you think know them. Then go play with some real musicians. You'll come home eager to practice more basics. Get out of the one-trick pony mindset that is turning folks away from your musical efforts. Play songs that everyone recognizes. Get your friends and family to sing along. Odds are that you will soon have to invest in another instrument or two.

When you pull out an instrument you are making a statement. The folks who are watching expect you to deliver the goods. They want to be entertained. By presenting yourself as a musician you have an obligation to do just that. An audience will not respond because you feel the pain of a misrepresented regional banjo style. They will not embrace you for boring them with historical trivia. They could care less how many different tunings you know. They do not see you as a cultural conduit. To them you are an entertainer.

You can change your luck today by behaving like one.

Peace to all,
Pat Costello (Dear Old Dad)

The Art Within the Art

The other day a fellow down in Georgia named Stephen set us a really nice note, and he brought up something that I think needs to be addressed.

Stephen wrote about the banjo:

... Your father's and your methods of breaking down the "bum-ditty" rhythm made the whole process a "BLINDING GLIMPSE OF THE OBVIOUS"!!!!!!

...and later on about the guitar:

You have boiled the right hand of Blues and Folk Guitar down to another BLINDING GLIMPSE OF THE OBVIOUS. Your building block method of right hand development can be applied to Travis Picking, regular Folk Style and the Mississippi Delta Blues style".

Dear Old Dad and I would like to thank him for the kind words, but breaking down things isn't something we can take credit for. Believe it or not, this is the way we were taught - and it's the way folk music was presented until everything went commercial with the folk revival.

Heck, it's not just a concept for teaching music. When I was studying Modern Arnis with Remy Presas he presented things in a bare-bones style that allowed his students to explore the uses of simple techniques.

I still remember the day I asked him what the point was of studying to fight with rattan sticks. I was living in Philadelphia so it wasn't something I could pick up on any corner and I couldn't exactly walk around town carrying a pair of sticks.

Remy just smiled and told me I was thinking all wrong. The sticks were just for practice. The blocks and strikes would work just fine using my empty hands - and if I really needed a stick there were substitutes available everywhere.

Substitute sticks? Like picking up a branch?

Remy shook his head and took me for a walk. As we wandered through town he kept pointing at random things. A branch on the sidewalk, a bottle on the curb, a piece of pipe in the gutter and everyday street trash telling me every time to pick it up and try some blocks and strikes. After a while the game started to get more complicated when he began pointing out things like parking meters and fire hydrants asking me how they could be used to my advantage.

That's when it hit me that the basic skills I had been practicing were nothing more than an exercise. In the real world I wouldn't have my sticks but I would have my training. Arnis was more than stick and knife fighting, it was also training me to think creatively and make use of everything in my environment - and once you start thinking like that it becomes more than a way of looking at fighting because I started looking at alternate uses for everything picked up.

I still do.

When I had to give up the martial arts I took that one technique with multiple uses philosophy into music - and I was thrilled to discover that most of the really good musicians I met had the same viewpoint.

For example, every time I worked up a song in a given key some grizzled old picker would smile at me and ask to hear it in a different key. At first that drove me crazy, but after a while I started to get a grasp of what really goes on in a key change - how the fingerings change but the overriding concept stays the same. Just like with Remy, once I saw that I couldn't not see it anymore. The system that seemed complex slowly became something simple.

The basic frailing banjo strum and the technique we use to teach folk guitar have a logic to them that can only happen after a lot of people hammer on the same ideas over a long period of time. Every individual ends up with a unique result - or I should say, application - but over time you end up with a sort of basic skill set.

In karate we have katas and other formalized exercises for blocks and strikes. We practice them until the basic motions are so ingrained that we can't do them "wrong" anymore and then in real-world application we drop the formality and improvise - but our training keeps that improvisation contained to movements that still have the defensive and offensive strong points of our basic skill set.

In frailing banjo and folk guitar we have some formalized exercises. It's not like karate where we're trying to hit somebody without getting hit in return, but we still have to learn how to use our bodies to play in rhythm, form chords, pick the strings and stuff like that. Without rhythm we can't play with other people.

Without picking skills we can't control our volume. Without good posture we can't form chords without ruining our fretting hands. Folk musicians have worked for a long time to find ways to address those concerns and the basic frailing strum is a good example of the kind of techniques they came up with.

At first glance frailing banjo and acoustic guitar can seem horribly complex. In some ways that's a good thing because part of the magic of performing is being able to do stuff on stage to wow the audience - but once you get away from the stage and approach this discipline as a student you have to ditch the complicated show-off stuff and find the simple solutions.

Some students and some teachers nowadays can't bring themselves to look for the simple answers. Instead of learning to play an instrument people set out to imitate and replicate stage performances without bothering to address the actual work that led up to that performance.

When Dear Old Dad and I were starting out the people we knew looked at music differently, and neither of us has any real desire to catch up with the current trends. We're just teaching the way we were taught. Our approach is unique because our lives have been kind of interesting - but all we have really done is put our own stamp on a time-tested set of teaching concepts.

If we do our jobs right, you guys and gals will be taking things to the next logical step at some point down the road. You will add your own perspectives, your own stories and your own vibe to the folk process. Your students, and their students after them will do the same - but the core idea will stay pretty much the same.

That core idea is the art within the art.

-Patrick
12/11/06

The Mighty Frail

John in Iowa writes:

Why the frailing stroke? I have played guitar for years and can play the banjo with a flat pick and make it sound almost like the frailing strum, minus the fifth string. I know it isn't the same and I'm working night and day to get the frail down. But, since a very similar sound can be achieved, why did the banjoists of the past go to the trouble to learn this difficult pattern?

Because it works.

-Patrick

5/18/07

Life's Hard Lessons

I learned to frail on an old Harmony banjo. You know, the one with a composite pot/resonator and a neck/dowel combo that looked like it was transplanted from a barn broom. Yeah, it was cheesy and crude but it was mine. I played it every chance I got while I was learning to play and sing. Like most novices I finally decided that I was ready to move up to a "real" banjo. I visited a local music store but they specialized in guitars and band instruments. These folks admitted that they could not be of any real help. I then asked my banjo friend if he could help me find and buy a really good banjo. He was more than happy to oblige.

He told me that he knew of a first rate banjo for sale by a dealer at the Gilbertsville Farmer's Market. He was vague about the details but he assured me that this was "the banjo" for me and that he could personally vouch for the character of the dealer and the quality of the banjo. Well, what I knew about banjos at the time amounted to almost nothing. My friend had been playing for decades and he owned a lot of banjos so I put myself in his hands.

We arrived at the dealer's stall on a Friday evening. The guy had lots of banjos, guitars and mandolins hanging from the ceiling and laying on tables. He saw my friend and reached for a banjo. He was expecting us. The dealer handed me a very old banjo. It had friction pegs and a spun-over rim. It was hard to tune and it did not have any real tone or volume. I didn't think much of this banjo. My buddy got very uneasy. He told me that this was a great deal and that I would be sorry if I let it go. The dealer was just disgusted that I could not see the quality in this banjo. I walked right into the trap. I handed over \$150.00 for a banjo based entirely on someone else's endorsement. My \$25.00 Harmony was a better instrument than this thing.

I now know that the endorsement was not real. My "friend" got a kickback from the dealer for delivering a pigeon. I later took the banjo to a shop that specialized in banjos to see if it could be made playable. The owner just laughed and said that there was nothing he could do. This banjo was junk when it was made and it was junk now. I asked to look at some real banjos. There was no pressure. The shopkeeper answered my questions and let the instruments do the talking. I bought a high quality modern instrument and I never regretted the investment.

There is a lesson here:

View all endorsements with some cynicism. Friends or acquaintances may mislead you by accident or by design. What is good for them may not be good for you. Be especially wary of anonymous endorsers on the Internet. One of the first tricks in guerilla marketing is to create a flood of gushing reviews by unidentified "experts". You have no way of knowing who they are or if they even exist. Remember that guerilla marketers will do and say anything to get your money. Take your time. Think things over. Visit an acoustic music shop and look at several brands and models. Buy the best instrument that you can reasonably afford. Just be sure that when you open the case you feel the inner glow that emerges when you hug an old friend.

It's a cold world. Bring a blanket.

More later. Till then, don't step in anything soft.

-Pat (Dear Old Dad) Costello
2006

Finding Mississippi

Before the Internet and before compact disks there was the radio.

Now I know you've heard the radio before, but it's easy to forget how powerful it was back in the day when it was just about the only way to hear any music.

For the old guitar players I used to hang around with it was big AM stations like WWVA and WSM. By the time I was a kid the AM band was pretty much all news and really weird religious broadcasts so my lifeline to the music world was the folk show Sunday nights on WHYY.

Every week I would take a stack of cassette tapes and sit all night with my finger on the record button of my boom-box. As soon as the DJ played something interesting I would hit 'record' and by the next morning I had a stack of tapes that I would listen to all week. You couldn't just record the whole show because folk radio was, and I guess still is, always trying so hard to make everybody happy that you never knew what kind of downright weird stuff was going to be played. I liked the old blues records and some of the other stuff, but I didn't want to save things like Hungarian goat herding music or old protest songs about obscure politicians.

I had been doing this for a while when one night this record came on that started with an old guy talking about coffee.

As soon as he said "Coffee time" I hit the record button because this guy's voice was just so cool. It was the kind of voice you'd expect to hear if a bluebird was ever able to have a conversation with you. All sort of sing-song and kind of cheerful in a sad sort of way. As if he had seen too much of the world but wasn't going to let it bring him down. It was something a kid in Philadelphia didn't get to hear very often. Then he started to play the guitar and I was never quite the same.

I'm not going to try and put the music into words because I don't think anything I could say would draw the right image. It was just the coolest thing I had ever heard. I sat there listening to this guy singing about his favorite brand of coffee and playing his guitar and I just about lost my mind. After the DJ came on and said that the song was Coffee Blues by some guy named Mississippi John Hurt I rewound the tape and listened to it another three times. Then I dragged out my guitar and spent the rest of the night on the back steps driving the neighbors crazy trying to figure out just what this guy was doing.

I spent days trying to work out the picking patterns and when that didn't work I went to a music book store and started looking for more information on this guy. I wound up working for a slumlord cleaning out a pair of apartments vacated by a cat lady to make enough money to buy those books.

The other guys in my high school had centerfolds taped inside their locker doors, but I had a black and white photo of Mississippi John Hurt sitting on a park bench with his guitar case propped up next to him in my locker. When somebody noticed it my explanation was, "someday I'm going to be that cool."

There was just one problem. The stuff in the books didn't make sense.

Oh, they were well written and had lots of pictures to look at. There were interviews and stuff like that, but I started to get the feeling that the people who made these books wanted to talk about this music rather than teach it. The songs they covered were laid out in tablature but there was almost never any kind of general picking pattern that you could use throughout the song. It seemed that playing fingerstyle blues guitar required learning a song note-by-note and that seemed impossible to me.

I fought through the tablature until my fingers bled. I'm not being dramatic here. I know that local guitar heroes like to throw that "play until your fingers bleed" line like some kind of macho catchphrase but I can tell you from personal experience that it's neither macho nor fun.

I ran through this stuff for so many hours that my fingertips looked like they had been chewed up by a cheese grater and still nothing I was doing made any sense. After a few months my left wrist started to swell up and I started tying my hand open with a bandanna handkerchief pinned inside my coat sleeve to brace my hand open when I was in school.

It was maddening because I wanted to play so badly and all I was doing was just that, playing badly. After a few months of putting myself through the wringer I wound up sitting on the back steps with my left hand in a bucket of ice and my right hand holding a guitar that I just couldn't play. It hit me that I wasn't going to be able to do this and I just about cried my eyes out.

I gave up for a while. I would run through simple stuff on the guitar but I wasn't happy because I still couldn't figure out how to play the way I wanted to play. I stuck to the banjo and told myself that I just didn't have that "it" that lets you play the guitar. I kept on taking my six-string with me everywhere, but I kind of felt like the guitar had betrayed me somehow.

Right about then Pop took me up to this picking party a friend of ours was putting on. He ran a music shop and was having this sort of get-together for his customers. I brought my guitar but I wasn't expecting to do much with it.

I was kicking back under the pavilion when this little guy came over. He wanted to show me a banjo he had made. It wasn't a bad looking banjo, and to top it off there was an elaborate and pretty detailed naked lady inlaid on the resonator. The girl on the banjo was holding a panther on a gold chain and the whole thing was well done but kind of weird. Trust me, when a high school kid sees a picture of a naked woman and can only think wow! That's kind of weird, you know something isn't quite right.

"Now what in the hell are you showing a kid that for?"

I looked up and there was this huge old guy talking to the fellow who had made the banjo.

"Something wrong with you, buddy? Showing a kid that sort of thing, what are you thinking?"

I tried to tell the big guy that it wasn't a big deal but he turned to me, pointed to my guitar case, and said "Get your guitar and come with me."

I started to blow the guy off. I don't like taking orders and I was still pouting about my lack of any guitar skills so taking my guitar with this guy didn't seem all that appealing at first. Then I took a look at the guitar he was carrying.

It was a Guild dreadnought and it was just about played to death. The fretboard was all gouged up and the finish was worn off the top of the guitar around the sound hole, but the creepy thing was that everything else on the guitar looked pretty new. It hit me that this guitar was only a few years old and this guy had put all of this wear on it in a fairly short period of time.

I got the feeling that I had better just go along with him and see what was going to happen. This had the potential to get real interesting.

We wandered to the far side of the picnic grounds and he flopped down on the grass, cracked his knuckles and went right into a Mississippi John Hurt song. As he was playing he started talking.

"This isn't a bad guitar, but it's already on its second fretboard. I wear them out every few years and once you gouge up the wood on the fretboard bad enough it gets kind of hard to keep hitting the notes just right."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I just stood there like an idiot staring at the guy's hands. His fingertips were so calloused that they looked more like claws, but they were just dancing around the strings.

"You just going to stand there kid or do you want to pick a bit? I don't care either way, I just didn't want to leave you with that guy. Naked women with panthers? On a banjo? It's just wrong"

I shook myself out of my daze and pulled my guitar out of its case. He looked at my chrome-plated Dobro 33-H and gave a little nod of approval. "Ah! You play the blues, do you? Let me hear you play something."

"Maybe I ought to just listen for a while. I can't seem to figure this stuff out."

He shook his head. "Let me hear what you've got and maybe I can help."

I figured it would be pretty lame to back out so I started fumbling through one of the songs I had been working on from the guitar books.

When I was halfway through the song I glanced over at the guy and he was just staring at me with this look of horror on his face. I stopped playing and the guy said, "My God, that was so bad I couldn't even tell what song it was! What do you think you are doing kid? I've got to ask because you sure ain't playing that guitar. That was bad enough to hurt my feelings!"

I threw my arms in the air in exasperation. "That's the problem, the books don't make any sense! I keep trying to play these songs and everything comes out sounding like garbage. Man, this just sucks!" I told him about all of the trouble I was having. Then I pulled one of the tab sheets from my guitar case and handed it to him.

"Oh that book! No wonder you're so confused. These guys treat everything measure by measure and never tell you how anything works." He crumpled up the piece of paper in his big claw like hand and threw it back into my guitar case. "Tune up, kid and let me show you how it works."

We went over the basics together. Play a simple rhythm and sing. Then start messing with the rhythm. He taught me the chord progression to Coffee Blues and My Creole Belle and had me play rhythm while he messed around with the melody.

"Your alternating bass goes through it all the time. Start working on that and always try to make your first bass note the same as the name of the chord you are playing. If it's a C chord your first bass note should be a C. The second bass note ought to be a five, you know what that is?" I shook my head and he rolled his eyes and muttered something about books.

"You'll figure out the five later on. Right now your best bet is to just mess with it and go with what feels right. When you can play the rhythm start moving your fingers around inside the chord form. Play me a D chord. Good, now take your pinky and put it on the first string at the fifth fret and hold on to that D chord. Don't look at me like that. I know it's a reach. Now strum that and then lift your pinky off the first string so the 'normal' D chord rings out. "

"Hey, that sounds pretty cool!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now go back to your plain old D chord. Take your ring finger on the second string at the third fret and flatten it out so that you are hitting the first string too. Strum that, and then move your ring finger so it's just hitting the second string. Now the whole time your middle finger is still on the first string at the second fret, right? Strum that regular D chord and then lift up your middle finger so the first string is open."

"Now if you keep playing with chords like that you'll start to find all sorts of melody lines. The trick is to keep the rhythm steady. If you've got the rhythm down you'll be able to fish around and play those melody notes." He went on to show me a similar idea using the A chord, but told me to figure some G chord variations on my own

I told him that this was pretty cool, but it wasn't what the books said to do. The books said these old blues players were doing something a lot more complicated than that.

"Well, you don't want to go against that. Those guys have been a real help up till now, haven't they?"

"Yeah, you've got me there. So how do I get this sound? I want it so bad and nothing is working."

"That's the problem. You want to do what you call 'the cool stuff' right away and that won't work. You've got to build up to it."

"If I do that will I play like Mississippi?"

He broke out laughing. "Hell no. I've been playing longer than you've been alive and I can't play like Mississippi John Hurt. Nobody can. You can only play like yourself."

"But those guys in the books. . ."

"Oh, you can get a song or two down note-for-note, but that's not the blues. The guys who do that kind of thing can't do anything but copy people. The only ideas they ever seem to have were thought up for them by somebody else."

He leaned back and started running through some song in the key of D. I played rhythm while he kept on talking.

"Mississippi lived his life. You've got to live your life. You're not an old black man from the Delta. You can play the same music and sing the same songs but it's always going to be different because you're different people. You've got to be yourself, kid."

He left it at that. We played a few more songs and then my dad wandered over and joined in with his tenor banjo. When it came time to start heading for home I thanked the old guy for giving me the tips and told him that I had a lot to think about. He just grinned at me and said that I would figure it out someday if I just gave myself some time.

Over the next few weeks I started messing with the chord tricks he had shared with me on the D and A chords. When I tried the same sort of thing with a C chord everything came together. By the end of the night I had a simple but cool sounding arrangement of Stagolee put together along with the beginnings of a few other tunes.

I jumped up and started running around the back yard in the rain waving my arms in the air yelling, "I've got it! I've got it!" like some kind of crazy person.

I may have been a tad overenthusiastic. It took me years to actually get to a point where I even remotely thought of my playing as "good" but the funny thing was that people started complimenting me the first time I played my mongrel version of Stagolee in public. My dad got involved and started playing back up rhythm on his tenor banjo so I wouldn't start drifting out of the rhythm on more complicated songs. After a while I stopped thinking about Mississippi John Hurt. I just played the guitar the way I thought it should sound and tried my best to make musical sense. What I played changed from what I thought somebody else was doing into what I felt at the moment. I can play Mississippi John Hurt songs nowadays, but I like to twist things around and make the song suit how I feel.

I started out looking for the secret of somebody else's music and kept coming back confused and frustrated. When I decided to forget all of that and just start playing the guitar I found what I was looking for, and a lot more. I guess you could say I set out to find something in Mississippi only to find out that the answers to my questions were out on my own front porch.

Buying Your First Banjo

Update 1/28/08

Dear Old Dad and I are selling affordable banjos and guitars now, but that doesn't change the advice presented in this article. We still love the old Harmony banjos. If you can find one, play the daylights out of it. If you can't find one, give us a call.

Buying a first banjo has always been a bit of a challenge. Dear Old Dad still bristles every time I bring up the old banjo a buddy talked him into buying ages ago - not just because the banjo was a pig in a poke, but because his buddy had gotten a kickback for steering him into buying an unplayable banjo.

The Internet hasn't made things any easier. Web based banjo discussion forums are loaded with advice that wavers between clueless and dishonest. In this age of guerrilla marketing it's not uncommon to see a long list of endorsements posted for instruments before they even move out of the prototype stage of development.

In other words, the instrument market is just like any other market. If you go shopping without doing a bit of homework you can make some expensive mistakes.

For example, about ten years ago I was approached by a guy at a festival who wanted to know what his banjo was worth. I took a look at the instrument and it was an imported student model banjo in pretty rough shape. Gold eagle decal, aluminum bottle cap rim and guitar tuners. I told the guy it was worth about fifty to a hundred bucks and he burst into tears.

I'm not kidding here. He just dropped his head into his hands and started sobbing.

So I'm standing there holding this fifty dollar banjo wondering how to get out of there when the guys wife walks over. She put her arm over his shoulder and he looked up and managed to choke out between the sobbing, "It's only worth fifty bucks!"

She clutched her hands to her breast, threw back her head and started to wail. I was stuck standing there holding the banjo. I tried to hand it over either one of them so I could run away, but by then they were holding each other crying, "What are we gonna do?"

Then their kids came over. The boy and the girl saw mom and dad weeping and wailing so they started doing the same. Now I had the whole fam-damilly around me so I was pretty much surrounded with no avenue of escape.

I managed to get out of them that they had paid a lot of money for the banjo. I don't know how much but it was a heck of a lot more than fifty bucks and obviously more than they could afford to lose.

They finally stopped crying, but it didn't help anything because the tears were replaced by rage. The guy who had sold them the banjo wasn't around so they decided to take their frustration out on me and by the time I managed to escape they were calling me every name in the book.

On its own that's a funny story, but for me it's just one sad chapter in a long string of encounters with people who got hosed buying a banjo.

So what should you look for in a first banjo?

For a first banjo I don't recommend spending any more than \$60.00 to \$200.00. Look for American made composite-pot open-back instruments built from the 1940's to the late 1970's. There were tens of thousands of these instruments sold under brand names like Harmony, Kay or Silvertone and you can still pick one up in great shape for about a hundred bucks.

Keep in mind that I'm talking about composite-pot open-back banjos. The banjo rim should be made out of something like Bakelite or, in some cases, a sort of pressed wood or particleboard material. Be cautious with aluminum rim banjos, and do not bother with any that have a resonator. There is no such thing as a good entry-level aluminum rim resonator banjo.

I repeat; there is no such thing as a good entry-level aluminum rim resonator banjo.

One thing you really want to try and avoid is the aluminum "bottle cap" style banjo. You'll see these banjos everywhere - in fact they are still being made today. These are resonator banjos with an aluminum or white metal rim with a funky scalloped hoop sticking out of the side to act as a flange. Because of this built-in flange you can't play these banjos comfortably without the resonator - and with the resonator on they have an odd tone that, to me at least, sounds for all the world like somebody tossing nickels into a rusty bucket.

The composite-pot open-back banjos built by Harmony and Kay were never the prettiest instruments to come down the pike but they were never sold as anything but affordable instruments. That's an important distinction because modern makers tend to group anything under a thousand dollars as a beginner instrument and as a result foster the misconception that in order to really play you have to shell out three to five thousand dollars.

A hundred dollar Harmony isn't a beginner banjo, it's just a banjo. If you play it for a year and move on that's cool. If you play it for twenty years that's cool too. Shoot, one of the best banjo players I have ever had the pleasure to meet played an old Kay.

You can find these banjos just about everywhere. A quick run through Ebay, Craigslist or local outlets like yard sales, Goodwill stores or pawn shops will turn up one of these banjos without breaking a sweat. Before you spend any money be sure to talk to your neighbors because there are still thousands of these instruments gathering dust in closets.

Shoot, every few months somebody walks up and gives us one to give away.

When you find one, look at the price. If it's free (like from a neighbor) just grab it, but if you're spending money you really shouldn't have to pay more than around \$60 to \$150.

If the price is right, check the neck. Make sure it's not cracked, warped or twisted. Make sure all five (or four, if it's a tenor banjo) tuning pegs are on the banjo and still function reasonably well. Don't worry too much about the banjo head because that can be replaced for twenty bucks, but some of these banjos have funky bracket hooks that can be hard to replace. Missing a bracket hook or two isn't a deal breaker but you'll want to get the seller to come down a few bucks.

A lot of these banjos will have four guitar tuners and a friction fifth string peg. Don't sweat the guitar tuners, but the friction fifth string pegs can be a pain in the neck. If it's not a problem leave it be, but you can pick up a geared peg for a few bucks - just don't try to install it yourself unless you're comfortable using a drill.

Other than that, there really isn't anything to watch out for. A lot of these banjos have horrible but functional tailpieces and pretty cheesy bridges, but those things are cheap and simple to replace. Sometimes you'll find one of these banjos with some kind of a tone ring or tone hoop and sometimes you won't. They all sound the same and they all sound different so don't worry about it. Just get it playable and then start making music.

Even if you find a banjo in bad shape it's not too big of a deal to resurrect these instruments. Frank Ford has an interesting article at Frets.com covering the steps he went through to set up a 60's Kay banjo that was in pretty bad shape.

The other thing to keep in mind about these banjos is that they are cheap enough to give away if you should decide to move on to a fancier instrument. In other words, you can release your banjo back into the wild and give somebody a chance to start playing. It's a simple thing, but doing stuff like that is essential to keep the folk process going.

After you've been playing a while you'll be able to decide for yourself if you want a fancier banjo - just don't make the mistake of thinking that you have to shell out a huge amount of cash to start playing. For a little bit more than sixty bucks or so you can start making music. That's pretty cool when you think about it.

So get out there. Find an old Kay or Harmony and start practicing your basic frailing strum!

-Patrick

Guitar Chords, Progressions & Picking Patterns

Digging through some old files today I ran across this old text workshop I wrote back in 2005. I think it was written in reply to a question on a forum about spicing up three chord songs.

-Patrick

I wouldn't worry about "adding" chords. Throwing in chord inversions and keeping the melody together is something that takes a bit of skill to actually pull off. Just randomly throwing in an extra chord here and there is fun when you're home alone, but if you do it in a jam session somebody is going to spank you like a circus monkey for throwing everybody out of whack.

To talk about what you "can" do I'm going to have to give into a wee bit of music theory - but don't sweat it because this stuff is actually pretty simple once you understand it.

I think the first step to really being able to use chord progressions is learning how they are built.

If I just say, "In the key of C you usually can count on the song using the C, F and G chords" if doesn't give you the whole picture. As soon as you play a song like Freight Train in C and run into the E chord you'll be thinking, "where the hell did that come from?"

So what "makes" a chord progression?

It's built on scales.

Now, don't freak out and run away here. I know that some goomer at a festival might have convinced you that music theory is either hard or not applicable to traditional music but neither of those old wives tales is true.

A scale is just a sequence of notes. The formal term is something more along the lines of "the key of E is a major mode with a root of E," but we won't be getting into modes for a while so thinking of it as a sequence of notes makes things easier for now.

In Western music we are only working with twelve notes. The twelve notes are named after the letters A through G with a note or half-step between each pair of letters except between B and C and E and F:

A | B C | D | E F | G |

Your half step is either a sharp (#) or a flat (b.)

The half step between A and B can be called either A# or Bb.

A# means that the A note is raised one half step higher. Bb is the B note lowered one half step. A# and Bb are the same note and the other half steps follow the same pattern.

So with all twelve notes laid out you have the chromatic scale:

A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab

Once you understand the idea of half steps you can just write out your chromatic scale like this to save space and make it a tad clearer.

The " | " symbol will be used to represent a half step.

A | B C | D | E F | G |

To hear this on your banjo play the third string at the second fret

(an A note) and play that string on each fret all the way through twelve frets for each note of the chromatic scale.

To figure out the notes of the C scale we need to lay out the string of notes starting with our root note. In this case the root note is C so we start with the C note. Because we are only working with the letters A through G the notes after the G note is going to be A.

It might help to think of the notes as being laid out in a loop or circle.

C | D | E F | G | A | B C

Now if you notice we started on C and ended on C. That second C is called the octave. It is the same note as the root but higher in pitch.

What we have here now is a chromatic scale starting on C and ending on C.

Root, whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, whole step, half step.

C is the root.

1. A whole step from C is D.
2. A whole step from D is E.
3. A half step from E is F
4. A whole step from F is G
5. A whole step from G is A
6. A whole step from A is B
7. A half step from B is C

So your C scale is

C D E F G A B C

Now, try writing out some scales on your own.

Once you have a scale laid out- and it might be a good idea to sit down and work out A couple of scales here for keys you will be using a lot on the banjo like A,D and G and keeping them handy to use in the next step- go ahead and number each note:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
C D E F G A B C

The notes numbered 1, 4 and 5 (C, F and G) will be your major chords for the key of C.

Go back and look at all the songs in the key of G that know (that is, if you are already playing a couple of songs.) You will notice that almost all of them use some combination of G, C and D. Some songs will only have two of the chords but most of the time you will see all three.

The note numbered 6 is going to be your relative minor. In this case Am.

Every root chord has a relative minor chord. We'll go into this in more detail later on, but every key has a unique number of sharps and flats. The key of C has no sharps or flats and the key of G has one sharp (F#.) The same rule applies to

minor keys. Any minor key that has the same number of sharps and flats as a major key is the relative minor of that major key.

The key of Am has no sharps or flats therefore it is the relative minor of C.

It is good to know your relative minor chords (the 6 chord in the number system) because you can swap them around in some situations. If you are playing a song and cannot remember how to make an Am chord you can just play a C chord. It is different but it is close enough that you may get away with it.

The note numbered 2 is going to be both a minor chord and a major chord. In this case Am and A.

Number 3 is where it gets kind of neat because in folk music this is often referred to as an "off chord." In the key of C your off chord is E (remember when I mentioned Freight Train?.)

Your 6 chord can be played as a major chord as well. But it is kind of funky. You will really only use the major 6 once in a great while. In some songs like "Little Maggie" you might run into what some players call a mountain seven. That is when you flat the 7 chord. That is why "Little Maggie" goes from G to F rather than G to F# (it's actually a mode, but modes complicate things at this point - if you want to learn about modes look for *A Book Of Five Strings* by yours truly.

So right now we know how to build a scale and how to build a chord progression and your head hasn't exploded yet. Let's take this over to the guitar.

Just about every fretted instrument you are going to run into is laid out so that the fretboard follows the concept of the chromatic scale. This goes back to ancient Greece when a bunch of old fat guys in togas were spending all day plunking on a monochord.

If your guitar is in standard tuning your first string is tuned to E. If you fret that E string at the first fret you end up with an F note. Fret that E string at the third fret and you get an F#. If you lay out a chromatic scale starting on E you can see you each fret moves along the chromatic scale.

E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E

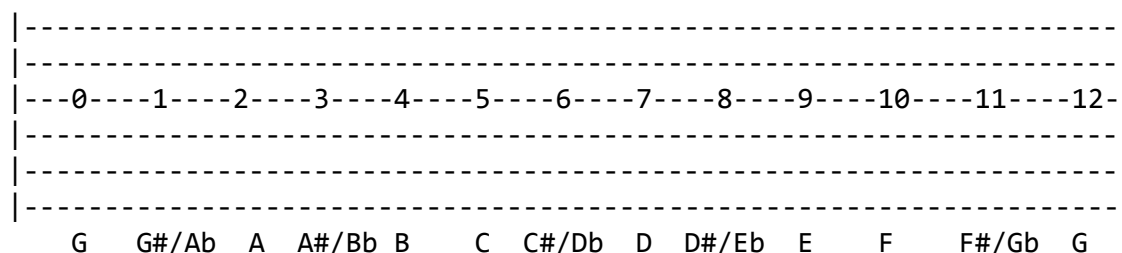
It's the same for each of your strings. The third string is tuned to G so if you walked down the fretboard you'd end up with this string of notes:

G G#/Ab A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E F F#/Gb G

To hear this on your guitar play the third string at the second fret (an A note).

Then play that string on each fret all the way through twelve frets. You have just played each note of the chromatic scale. This works because the fretboard is laid out to follow the chromatic scale.

Look at it this way. The third string of your guitar is tuned to G. If we fret the G string at the first fret we get a G#/Ab. Keep that idea moving down the fretboard and . . .



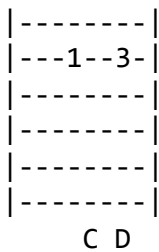
Each string on your guitar follows the same pattern. The first string is tuned to E so fretting the first string at the first fret gets you an F note and fretting at the third fret gets you a . . . come on, figure this one out on your own . . . if you said "G" you've got the idea!

Now let's go back to the good old C scale we worked out earlier: C D E F G A B C.

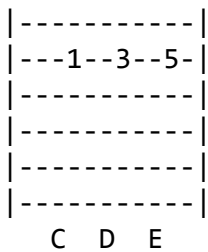
To play this on the guitar we could use the same formula that we used to play the A chromatic scale. We can start this on the second string at the first fret.

Why? Because the second string is tuned to B and as a result fretting that B string at the first fret gives you a C note.

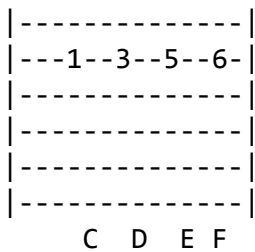
A whole step from C is D:



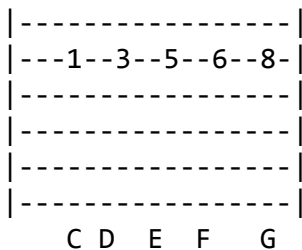
A whole step from D is E:



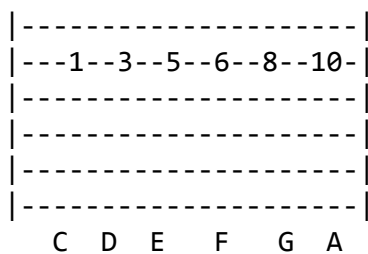
A half step from E is F:



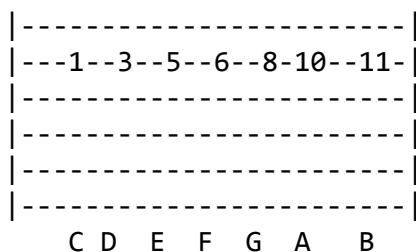
A whole step from F is G:



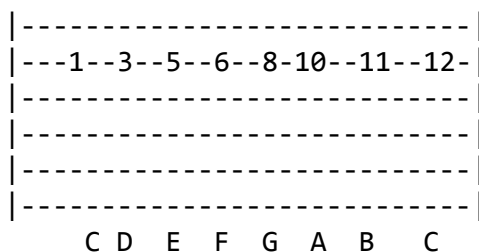
A whole step from G is A:



A whole step from A is B:



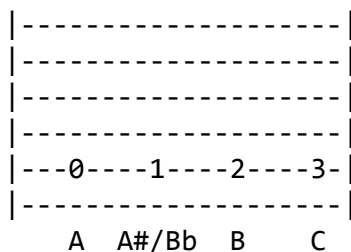
A half step from B is C:



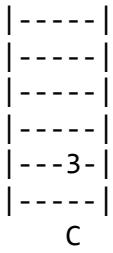
And that gives us a C scale.

That isn't the only C scale on your guitar. You can play a C scale anywhere on the fretboard. Try playing a C scale starting on the fifth string at the third fret.

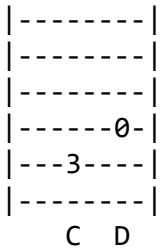
That's a C note because the fifth string is tuned to A:



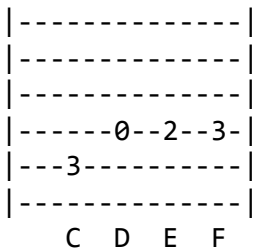
So we start with C:



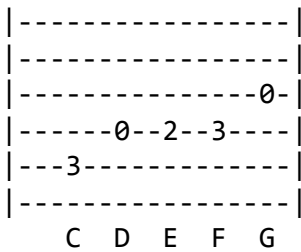
The next note in the scale is D- and that just happens to be the next open string:



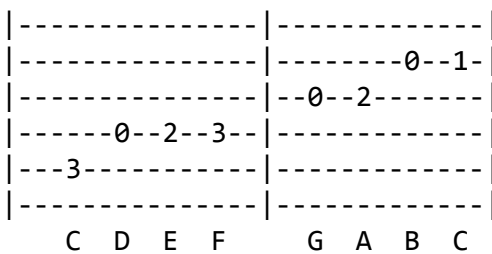
After D comes E and F:



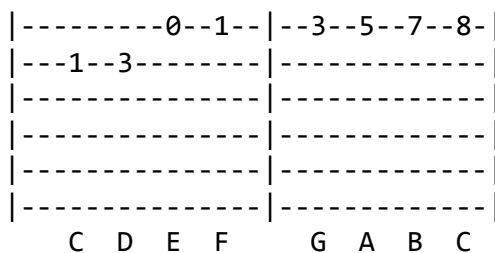
The next note in the scale is G- and we can move over to the next open string for that note:



And you just keep that idea going until you hit the next C note:



And you can start another C scale from that C note:



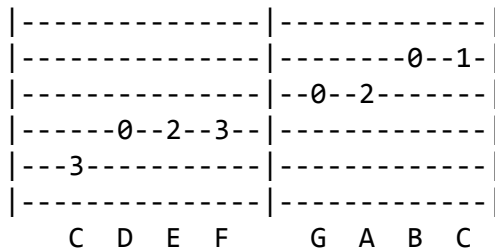
So playing a major scale isn't a big deal. In fact, it's nothing more than playing a simple pattern of whole and half steps on the fretboard.

Try working out some more scales on your own.

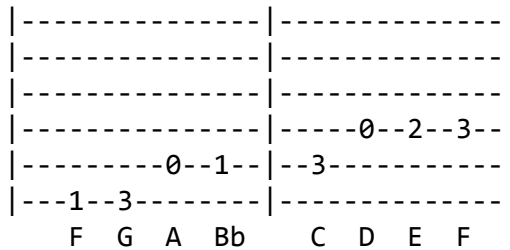
For the next part of this mini workshop we will be using the C, F and G scales.

To save time I'll tab the bass-string scales out for you.

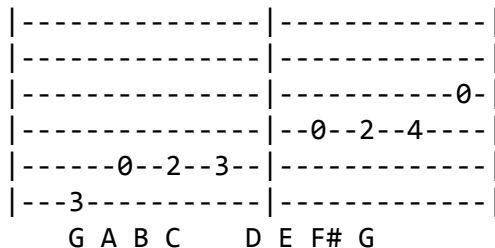
C:



F:



G:



Alternating Bass

Using the root note for the bass sounds good but it's kind of boring. In order to give the song a feeling of motion we can alternate the bass. To do this we play the root note for the first bass strum in a measure and either the fifth or the third note of the scale to start the second bass strum:

C:

-----	-----
-----	-----0--1-
-----	--0--2-----
-----0--2--3--	-----
---3-----	-----
-----	-----
C D E F	G A B C
Root 3rd	5th

So if we use the root and the third note for our bass notes for a C chord we get an alternating bass pattern like this:

C
-----0-----0-- -
-----1-----1-- -
-----0-----0-- -
-----2---2-2-- -
---3-3-----3-- -
-----x-----x-- -

For an F chord it's a bit trickier because of the sixth string F note at the first fret.

In the beginning you can just fudge a root-five for the F chord.

And when you apply that to a song like *Boil Them Cabbage Down*:

C	F	C
-----0-----0--	-----1-----1-	-----0-----0--
-----1-----1--	-----1-----1-	-----1-----1--
-----0-----0--	-----2---2---2-	-----0-----0--
-----2---2---2--	3---3-----3-	-----2---2---2--
---3---3-----3--	-----3-----3-	3---3-----3--
-----x-----x--	-----x-----x-	-----x-----x--
boil them cab-bage	down down	bake them hoe-cakes

G	C	F
-----3-----3-	-----0-----0--	-----1-----1-
-----0-----0-	-----1-----1--	-----1-----1-
-----0-----0-	-----0-----0--	-----2---2---2-
-----0-----0-	-----2---2---2--	3---3-----3-
-----2---2---2-	3---3-----3--	-----3-----3-
---3---3-----3-	-----x-----x--	-----x-----x-
brown brown	the only song that I can sing is	

C	G	C
-----0-----3--	-----0-----0--	-
-----1-----0--	-----1-----1--	-
-----0-----0--	-----0-----0-*	-
-----2-----0--	-----2---2---2-*	-
---3---3-----2--	3---3-----3--	-
-----x---3---3--	-----x-----x--	-
boil them cab-bage down		

Bass Runs

If you mess around with your scales it's easy to add bass runs into the mix. Let's look at the first few measures of Boil Them Cabbage Down:

C	F	C
-----0-----0---	-----	-----0-----0---
-----1-----1---	-----	-----1-----1---
-----0-----0---	-----	-----0-----0---
-----2---2---2---	-----	-----2---2---2---
---3---3-----3---	-----0--2--	---3---3-----3---
-----x-----x---	---1--3-----	-----x-----x---

boil them cab-bage down down bake them hoe-cakes

G	C
-----	-----0-----0---
-----	-----1-----1---
-----	-----0-----0---
-----	-----2---2---2---
-----0--2-----	---3---3-----3---
---3-----3---	-----x-----x---

brown brown the only song that. . .

Okay, we've got some bass line stuff to mix in, what about the melody? Here's the trick: Hold a C chord and while you are holding the chord play this little piece of a C scale:

```
-----0--1--3--1--0-----
----1--3-----3--1-----
-----
-----
-----
-----
```

Just mess about with holding a C chord and playing that little bit of a scale now and then.

Now play a couple of measures of C with a simple thumb-brush:

```
-----0-----0---+----0-----0---
-----1-----1---+----1-----1---
-----0-----0---+----0-----0---
-----2-----2---+----2-----2---
---3--3-----3---+--3--3-----3---
-----3---3---3---+----3---3---3---
```

Count: 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4

(we're playing a simple quarter note strum here)

And once you practice that for a little while and use it in a jam it's easy to move on to the Carter Strum (which is actually nothing more than the "bump dit-ty" from frailing banjo, but since the idiots in banjo camps can't play the "bump dit-ty" that technique has been labeled 'untraditional' with a whole cock and bull story about the technique being invented by

Pete Seeger . . . I really freaking hate the "music community" sometimes!)

Where was I? Oh yeah, the Carter strum:

```
-----0--0-----0--0--+-----0--0-----0--0--
-----1--1-----1--1--+-----1--1-----1--1--
-----0-----0-----+-----0-----0-----
-----2-----2-----+-----2-----2-----
---3--3-----3-----+--3--3-----3-----
-----3-----3--3-----+-----3-----3--3-----
```

Count: 1 2 & 3 4 & | 1 2 & 3 4 &

This isn't a quarter note strum, it's a quarter note and two eighth notes played in a "down, down, up" pattern. You can do it with a flatpick, but to "get" the rhythm down for fingerstyle guitar it's better to play the pattern with your thumb and index finger. Down with the thumb on the bass string, down with the thumb for the strum and then strum up with the index finger.

You jam with that for a while and the next step is to change up the rhythm into something more like fingerstyle guitar by replacing the strums with a single note.

```
-----0-----0--
-----
-----0-----0-----
-----
---3-----3-----
-----3-----3-----
```

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

And it doesn't have to be single notes:

```
-----0-----0--
---1-----1-----
-----0-----0-----
-----2-----2-----
---3-----3-----
-----3-----3-----
```

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Once you can keep the rhythm smooth playing a string of eighth notes the next step is to mix the alternating bass with the scale:

```

-----0--1--3--1--0----
-----1--3-----3-
-----
-----0-----0----
-----3-----3-----
-----

```

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Now play that same pattern but switch your chord form to F, Am and G. Don't change the fingering of the scale pattern, just move the alternating bass to the right notes for the chord form.

And right here you have the pattern that Doc Watson uses for *Doc's Guitar*, *Don't Think Twice*, *She's Gone Away*, *Deep River Blues* and a bunch of other songs. It also shows up in the playing of musicians as diverse as Merle Travis, Leo Kottke, Gary Davis, John Cephas and God only knows how many others.

If you tab out, say, *Deep River Blues* and *Doc's Guitar* on paper it looks like there is this long string of individual finger movements you have to memorize to play the song. The reality is that you only need to understand a few concepts to be able to play those songs and a thousand others.

The really wild thing about this concept is that the scales with alternating bass trick will work for any chord form.

The problem is that this:

```

-----0--1--3--1--0----
-----1--3-----3-
-----
-----0-----0----
-----3-----3-----
-----

```

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

will not work until you have mastered this:

```

-----0-----0---+-----0-----0----
-----1-----1---+-----1-----1----
-----0-----0---+-----0-----0----
-----2-----2---+-----2-----2----
---3--3---3---3---+---3--3---3---3---
-----3---3---3---+-----3---3---3---

```

Count: 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4

-Patrick

Frailing Backup

The basic backup pattern I use the most is just a banjo version of the alternating bass run used by guitar players. It's the basic frailing strum played of the third and fourth strings:

```
D-----0-----0---|---0-----0---|---0-----0---|---0-----0-----| - |
B-----0-----0---|---0-----0---|---0-----0---|---0-----0-----*| - |
G-----0---0-0---|---0---0-0---|---0---0-0---|---0---0-0-----*| - |
D---0-----|0-----|0-----|0-----| - |
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-----| - |
```

The tab above is showing the fourth and third string but you can mix up the pattern anyway you want like starting off on the third string:

```
D-----0-----0---|---0-----0---|
B-----0-----0---|---0-----0---|
G---0---0-----0---|0-0-----0---|
D-----0-----|-----0-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

If you want to start using licks to emphasize phrases in songs or tunes it's a good idea to get really used to playing a run like this because it gives you something to play between the licks that won't interfere with the singer or whoever is taking a break- and the back and forth between the third and fourth strings has a nifty way of creating the illusion of motion. The folks listening "feel" the song moving- which is why this sort of thing has been used so effectively in blues and country guitar.

Here is a simple version Banks of the Ohio using this pattern. It's just the basic bump dit-ty strum but I've spaced out a couple of the measure to fit the lyrics into the flow of the song.

Banks of the Ohio

G		D7	
D-----	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---
B-----	*-0-----0---	---0-----0---	---1-----1---
G-----	*-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---	-2-2-----2---
D-----	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-
G-----	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-
Darling say		you'll be mine in our	

D7		G	
D-----0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---
B-----1-----1---	---1-----1---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---
G---2-2-----2---	-2-2-----2---	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---
D-----0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-
G-----0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-
home		we'll happy be down be-	

G		C	
D-----0-----0---	---0-----0---	---2-----2---	---2-----2---
B-----0-----0---	---0-----0---	---1-----1---	---1-----1---
G---0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---
D-----0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---2-2-2---	---2-2-2---
G-----0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-
side		where the waters flow down on the	

G		D7		G	
D-----0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	-
B-----0-----0---	---1-----1---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---*	-
G---0-0-----0---	-2-2-----2---	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---*	-
D-----0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	-
G-----0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	---0-----0-0-	-
banks		of the		Ohi- o	

It's a really good idea to get used to playing this pattern before you start getting fancy with it. Pick up a good songbook and spend some time just playing and singing folk songs. I think one of the main reasons old time banjo is such a mess today is that everybody jumps into fiddle tunes right away without giving themselves time to build up the basic right and left hand skills.

This also has a neat way to expanding your repertoire without trying to remember a whole lot of individual notes. If you can play even the simplest backup technique and sing people will think you are the greatest thing since frozen orange juice because our ears have a weird way of "completing" what we hear. While you might just hear yourself singing along with a bump dit-ty strum people listening will think you are doing sixteen different things at once.

Once you are comfortable with the basic pattern throw in a hammer-on. In this example we're playing the fourth string at the second fret.

Simple G run

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|-----0-----0-----| - |
B-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|-----0-----0-----*| - |
G---h--0---0-0---|---h--0---0-0---|---h--0---0-0---|---h--0---0-0-----*| - |
D---0^2-----|---0^2-----|---0^2-----|---0^2-----| - |
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|-----0-----0---| - |
```

Try this run out of a C chord:

Simple C run

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|-----2-----2-----| - |
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|-----1-----1-----*| - |
G---h--0---0-0---|---h--0---0-0---|---h--0---0-0---|---h--0---0-0-----*| - |
D---0^2-----|---0^2-----|---0^2-----|---0^2-----| - |
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|-----0-----0---| - |
```

Then mess with the idea. You might get something like:

```
D-----2-----2---|---2-----2---|
B-----1-----1---|---1-----1---*|
G---0-0---0^2-2---|---0-0-----0---*|
D-----|-----2-2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

There are an almost infinite number of ways you can mix in some pull-off's, hammer-on's, slides and bends into a simple backup pattern.

What makes this so cool is that you don't really have to worry that much about playing the specific melody of a song. If you can frail a chord progression and keep the rhythm smooth while you sing a song people will be impressed. If you add in some licks people will think you're doing something amazing.

See, even if you can do a whole bunch of melodic stuff its really only going to work in the context of a banjo break or solo. The trick to backing up your voice or another instrument is to play simply so that the banjo sound effects don't fight the voice or the instrument playing lead.

When it comes to adding licks the big trick is to build up your ability to match the phrasing of a lick to the phrasing of the melody line. It's not just a matter of inserting "lick A" into "measure B." You want to be able to add emphasis and emotion to the phrase without changing the structure of the song. In order to do that you have to think of licks as little more than ideas that you reshape to fit into the song in question.

For example, a lick like this third string slide is pretty easy and it can fit into a lot of situations:

Third String Slide (G chord)

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B----s--0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
G---2^4-0---0-0---|--h--0---0-0---|
D-----0-----0---|-0^2-----|
G-----0-----0-|------0-----0--|
```

(Once you get comfortable with this lick try it on the fourth string)

It's cool- but sometimes you will need to change the emphasis of the lick. This can be accomplished by sliding on the fourth string at the second fret to the fourth fret- or even sliding the second string from the first to the third fret. That's easy to do because the timing isn't changing- but in some cases you might want the sound of the original lick but the timing has to be changed:

Third String Bend (G chord)

```
D----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
B--b-----0---|-----0-----0-----|
G-2^---0-0---|-----0---0-0-----|
D-----| -0h2-----|
G-----0-|------0-----0---|
```

What we're doing here is pretty close to the first lick, but by bending the string rather than playing a slide we can hold the note for a quarter note value and completely change the phrasing of the lick.

Other lick ideas can revolve around the idea of playing against open strings.

"Phantom" Hammer-on (G chord)

```
D----h--0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B---0^--0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
G-----2-0---0-0---|--h--0---0-0---|
D-----| -0h2-----|
G-----0-----0-|------0-----0--|
```

The trick here is to play the second string and while the string is still ringing hammer on the third string at the second fret.

Here's another easy one:

G Tag (G chord)

```
D-5^0-0---2^0-0---|-----0---|
B-----0-----0---|-1^0^--0---|
G-----0-----0---|----2-0-0---|
D-----|-----|
G-----0-----0-|------0--|
```

This is one of those really flexible licks. I do something different with it every time I use it, but this will at least give you something to work with. Try sliding into the first note.

C Chord Run (C chord)

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|
G-----0---0-0---| -2^0-0-----0---|
D-2^3-----|-----2-2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

The only thing that might trip you up with this one is using your pinky. We don't use our little fingers much and as a result they tend to be kind of weak. Make this lick part of your daily practice routine for a while and build up your hand strength a bit.

Licks are a lot of fun to mess around with- but you don't want to rely on anybody else to come up with them for you. Part of finding your own voice on the banjo is going to revolve around just messing chords and playing with sounds.

A good way to get started on this is to take a basic song you already know and start experimenting with ways to spice things up.

Let's take a look at Boil Them Cabbage Down in G and C with a basic frailing stroke.

Boil Them cabbage Down in C:

```
      C          F          C          G
D---2-2---2-2---| -3-3---3-3---| -2-2---2-2---| -0-0---0-0---| -|
B-----1-----1---| ---1-----1---| ---1-----1---| ---0-----0---| -|
G-----0-----0---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---| -|
D-----2-----2---| ---3-----3---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| -|
G-----0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| -|
```

```
      C          F          C      G      C
D---2-2---2-2---| -3-3---3-3---| -2-2---0-0---| ---2-----2---| -|
B-----1-----1---| ---1-----1---| ---1-----0---| -1-1---1-1---| -|
G-----0-----0---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---| -|
D-----2-----2---| ---3-----3---| ---2-----0---| ---2-----2---| -|
G-----0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| -|
```

Boil Them cabbage Down in G:

```
      G          C          G          D7
D-----0-----0---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---|
B---0-0---0-0---| -1-1---1-1---| -0-0---0-0---| ---1-----1---|
G-----0-----0---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---| -2-2---2-2---|
D-----0-----0---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---|
G-----0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-|
```

```
      G          C          G      C      G
D-----0-----0---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---| -|
B---0-0---0-0---| -1-1---1-1---| -0-0---1---| -0-0---0-0---| -|
G-----0-----0---| ---0-----0---| ---0---2-2---| ---0-----0---| -|
D-----0-----0---| ---2-----2---| ---0-----0---| ---0-----0---| -|
G-----0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| ---0-----0-| -|
```

There are a lot of things you can do to change the way the song is presented without losing the songs identity.

For example, we could play Boil Them Cabbage Down in C, but instead of just using the first string for the "bump" we could try the second string. We could even take things further and add in a hammer-on.

Here is the first few measures of Boil Them Cabbage Down in C trying that idea:

Boil Them Cabbage Down In C

```
D-----2-----2---|---3-----3---|---2-----2---|-0-0-----0---|
B---1-1---0^1-1---|-1-1---0^1-1---|-1-1---0^1-1---|---0---1^0-0---|
G-----0-----0---|---2-----2---|---0-----0---|---0-----0---|
D-----2-----2---|---3-----3---|---2-----2---|---0-----0---|
G-----0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|
```

If the second string works why not try the fourth string?

Boil Them Cabbage Down In C

```
D-----2-----2---|---3-----3---|---2-----2---|---0-----0---|
B-----1-----1---|---1-----1---|---1-----1---|---0-----0---|
G-----0-----0---|---2-----2---|---0-----0---|---0-----0---|
D---2-2---0^2-2---|-3-3---0h3-3---|-2-2---0^2-2---|-0-0---2^0-0---|
G-----0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|
```

If just adding a hammer-on works, why not try adding a lick? The "FMB Lick" might sound interesting.

Boil Them Cabbage Down in G with the "FMB Lick"

```
D-----0-----0---|---2-----2---|---0-----0---|---4-----4---|
B---2h3-3---2h3-3---|-1-1-----1---|-2h3-3---2h3-3---|---3-----3---|
G-----0-----0---|---0---0-0---|---0-----0---|-2-2-----2---|
D-----0-----0---|---2-----2---|-----0-----|---0---0-0---|
G-----0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|-----0-----|-0-0-----0-|
```

(Note that I'm using the D chord here instead of the D7. If the D chord gives you any trouble feel free to use the D7 instead)

Or we could try the third string slide.

Boil Them Cabbage Down in G with the third string slide

```
D-----0-----0---|---2-----2---|---0-----0---|---4-----4---|
B-----0-----0---|-1-1-----1---|---0-----0---|---3-----3---|
G---2^4-0---2^0-0---|---0---2^0-0---|-2^4-0---2^0-0---|-2-2-----2---|
D-----4-----4---|---2-----2---|---4-----4---|---0---0-0---|
G-----0-----0-|-0-0-----0-|-----0-----|-0-0-----0-|
```

Or we could put the two licks together . . .

Boil Them Cabbage Down in G with two licks

```
D-----0-----0--- | ---2-----2--- | -----0-----0--- | ---4-----4--- |
B-----0-----0--- | -1-1-----1--- | -2h3-3---2h3-3--- | ---3-----3--- |
G---2^4-0---2^0-0--- | ---0---2^0-0--- | -----0-----0--- | -2-2-----2--- |
D-----4----- | ---2-----2--- | ----- | ---0---0-0--- |
G-----0-----0- | -----0-----0- | -----0-----0- | -----0-----0- |
```

The really amazing thing here is that in spite of everything we're doing the song is still coming across as Boil Them Cabbage Down. In other words, you can do an awful lot to a song without losing the melody.

You also want to be aware that less usually is more. Don't start going ape with this stuff. Use these ideas for seasonings rather than the main course.

Spend some time playing simple folk songs and start messing with things to see how you can spice up your back up playing. It'll do wonders for your lead playing later on.

When it comes to playing up the neck the only trick is that in order to understand where to find stuff you need to understand the relationship between chord forms and scales,

In this example we are playing around with the fact that your D chord moved down to the ninth fret becomes a G chord and that you can blend the "high" G with the "open" G:

```
D-----0---7^0-0--- | -5-5-----5--- |
B---7^8-8-----8--- | ---5---5-5--- |
G-----0-----0--- | ---5---5--- |
D----- | ----- |
G-----0-----0- | -----0-----5- |
```

If you don't want to use the C at the fifth fret you can always jump all the way back up to your basic C chord. In the next example we are playing the whole chord as a hammer-on to make it interesting, and to give us a moment of breathing room to make that long run down the fretboard:

```
D-----0---7^0-0--- | -0^2-2---2p0-0--- |
B---7^8-8-----8--- | ---1-1-----1--- |
G-----0-----0--- | ---0-0-----0--- |
D----- | --^2-2-----2--- |
G-----0-----0- | -----0-----0- |
```

One thing I would suggest when it comes to picking up new ideas for your backup playing is to listen to, and hang out with, as many guitar players as you can find. Guitar players as diverse as Riley Pluckett and Robert Johnson had a lot of cool ideas that can be reshaped to fit into the frailing banjo framework. Listen to Johnny Cash and Hank Williams. Lonnie Johnson and Mississippi John Hurt. Then listen to some mandolin players like Bill Monroe. Good backup is everywhere because it adds so much to the music without overwhelming anything.

And don't forget to sing. Banjo solos get boring.

Before I toddle off let's look at happens to Banks of the Ohio when you stick in a few simple licks:

Banks of the Ohio in G

G		D7	
D-----	-----0-----0---	---0-----	-----0-----0---
B-----	*-s-0--0h-0---	---0-----	-----1-----1---
G--0-2-	*-2^4-4-----2-0---	-0-0-----0-	0h2-2-----2---
D-----	-----0-----	---0--4p0---	-----0--0h4-0---
G-----	-----0-----0-	---0-----	-----0-----0-

D7		G	
D-----0-----	-----0-----0---	---0--0---	---0-----0---
B-----1-----0-	0h1-1-----1---	---1-----1-	0-0-----0---
G--2-2--2---	-----2--2-2---	---2-----	---0-----0---
D-----0-----	-----0-----0---	-0-0-----	---0--0h2-----
G-----0-----	-----0-----0-	---0-----	---0-----0-

G		C	
D-----0--0-2-	0-0-----0---	---0-----	---2-----2---
B-----0-----	---0--0h-0---	---0-----0-	1-1-----1---
G--0-0-----	---0-----2-0---	-0-0--2---	---0--0-0---
D-----0-----	---0-----0---	---0-----	---2-----2---
G-----0-----	---0-----0-	---0-----	---0-----0-

C	G	D7	G
D-----2--0---	---0-----	---0-----	---0-----0---
B-----1-----1-	0-0-----0-	---1--0---	---0-----0---
G-----0-----	---0--0h2---	-2-2-----2-	0-0-----0---
D--2-2-----	---0-----	---0-----	---0--0h2-----
G-----0-----	---0-----	---0-----	---0-----0-

G	
D-----0-----	-
B-----0-----*	-
G--0-0--0-2-*	-
D-----0-----	-
G-----0-----	-

A few more things to mess around with with:

Half thumb:

D-----0-----0---	0-----0---
B-----1-----1---	--1^-----1---
G-----0--0^3-3---	---3-0-0---
D-----0^3-3-----	-----
G-----0-----0-	-----0-

This one is laid out in a quasi-modal setting with your index finger fretting the second string at the first fret. You can play it out of G modal tuning just as easily, but I have yet to find a real reason to retune for this sort of thing.

The "lick" is in the second measure. It starts out like a drop-thumb. You play the first string with your middle fingernail and drop your thumb down to play the second string- the change comes when you play a phantom hammer-on on the third string at the third fret. As indicated above the lick the phantom hammer-on is given a quarter note value.

This is most commonly used in modal-ish settings but once you understand the idea behind the lick it's easy to drop into other places.

This major key version of Rising Sun Blues uses drop thumb, double thumb and half thumb licks in 3/4 time. It's kind of freaky if you are used to the arpeggio-based minor-key version the Animals played in 4/4 time, but it's kind of banjo-bluesy in a cool sort of way. It's also an easy way to mess around with licks in 3/4 time.

Rising Sun Blues

3/4 Time Key of G

G		C		C7	
D----	0----	0----	2p0-	2----	2--0----
B---	3:-0h--	*--0----	1-1--0--	1----	1----
G---	4:--2-	*-0-0----	0----	0----	3-3----
D-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
G-----	-----0--0-	-----0----	-----0--0-	-----0--0-	-----0--0-

G		G7		G	
D---	5-5--0--	2^3-3--0--	0-0--0--	0-0--0--	0-0--0--
B-----	0-----	0-----0-	0--0--0--	0--0--0--	0--0--0--
G-----	0-----	0-----	0--0--0--	0--0--0--	0--0--0--
D-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
G-----	0--0-	0-----	0--0--0-	0--0--0-	0--0--0-

G		G7		C		C7	
D---	5-5--0--	2^3-3--0--	2----	2----	2----	2----	
B-----	0-----	0-----0-	1-1-----	1--1--1--	1--1--1--	1--1--1--	
G-----	0-----	0-----	0--0--0--	3-3-----	3-3-----	3-3-----	
D-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	
G-----	0--0-	0-----	0--0--0-	0--0--0-	0--0--0-	0--0--0-	

G		D7		G	
D-----	0-----	0-----	0--0--0--	0--0--0--	0--0--0--
B-----	0--0--	1--0h--	0--0--0--	0--0--0h---	*--
G---	0-0-----	2-2-----2-	0-0--0--	0-0--2---	*--
D-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
G-----	0--0-	0-----	0--0--0-	0--0--0-	0--0--0-

Back to 4/4 . . .

Tickle Lick:

D---	5^0-0--2^0-0--	p-----0--
B-----	0-----0--	1^0^h--0--
G-----	0-----0--	2-0-0--
D-----	-----	-----
G-----	0-----0-	-----0-

The lick is in the second measure. It's just pull-off mixed with a phantom hammer-on.

More Picking Patterns

These are a lot like the ones covered earlier. I just added some more to get you all thinking about the possible variations you can squeeze out of these ideas. You can use these in all sorts of ways. They work as repeating patterns or as stand-alone licks.

G patterns:

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
G-----0---0-0---|-----0---0-0---|
D---0h2-----|0h2-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
G-----0---0-0---|0h-0-----0---|
D---0h2-----|2-----0-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B---0h-0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
G-----2-0---0-0---|-----0---0-0---|
D-----|0h2-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B---0h-0---0h-0---|0h-0-----0---|
G-----2-0---2-0---|2-0---0-0---|
D-----|-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----0---|2-0-----0---|
B-----0-----0---|2-0-----0---|
G-----0-----0---|0-0-----0---|
D---2^5-----2p0---|-----2p0---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D---0h-0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
G-----2-0---0-0---|-----0---0-0---|
D-----|0h2-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

C Patterns:

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|
G-----0---0-0-0---|-----0---0-0-0---|
D---0h2-2-----2---|0h2-2-----2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|
G-----0---0-0-0---|-----0---0-0-0---|
D---2p0-2-----2---|2p0-2-----2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|
G---0h2-2---0h-0-0---|0h2-2---0h-0-0---|
D-----2-2-----|-----2-2-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|
G-----0---2p0-0-0---|-----0---2p0-0-0---|
D---0h2-2-----2---|0h2-2-----2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
B---0h1-1-----1---|0h1-1-----1---|
G-----0---2p0-0-0---|-----0---2p0-0-0---|
D-----2-----2---|-----2-----2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D---2p0-0-----0-0---|---2-----2---|
B-----1---1p0-0-0---|-1-1---1-1---|
G-----0-----0-0---|--0-----0-0---|
D-----2-----2---|--2-----2---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

You're probably getting the idea now. Here's D7:

D7 Patterns

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B-----1-----1---|-----1-----1---|
G---0h2-2-----2---|0h2-2-----2---|
D-----0-----|-----0-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----0---|---0-----0---|
B-----1-----1---|---1-----1---|
G---2-2-----2---|-2-2-----2---|
D-----0h4-----|-----0-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----0---|-----0-----0---|
B---1p0-1-----1---|-1p0-1-----1---|
G-----2---2-2---|-----2---2-2---|
D-----|-----|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

```
D-----0-----4---|-----0-----4---|
B-----3-----3---|-----3-----3---|
G-----2---2-2---|-----2---2-2---|
D---0h4-4-----0---|-0h4-4-----0---|
G-----0-----0-|-----0-----0-|
```

Here's another simple tune to mess around with. It's an old Charlie Poole song. The first tab is just a basic bump dit-ty pattern and the second tab used some simple licks to draw out the melody line.

Gypsy Girl - basic

4/4 time key of G

G		D7		G
D-----0-----0---		---0-----0---		---0-----0---
B-----0-----0---		---1-----1---		---0-----0---
G---0-0-----0---		-2-2-----2---		-0-0-----0---
D-----0---0-0---		---0-----0-0---		---0---0-0---
G-----0---0-0-		---0-----0-		---0---0-0-

once I was a gypsy girl but now I'm a rich man's bride with

G		D7		G
D-----0-----0---		---0-----0---		---0-----0---
B-----0-----0---		---1-----1---		---0-----0---
G---0-0-----0---		-2-2-----2---		-0-0-----0---
D-----0---0-0---		---0-----0-0---		---0---0-0---
G-----0---0-0-		---0-----0-		---0---0-0-

servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride while

G		C		G
D-----0-----0---		---2-----2---		-0-0-----0---
B-----0-----0---		---1-----1---		---0---0-0---
G---0-0-----0---		-0-0-----0---		---0-----0---
D-----0---0-0---		---2---2-2---		---0-----0---
G-----0---0-0-		---0-----0-		---0-----0-

in my carriage ride while in my carriage ride with

G		D7		G
D-----0-----0---		---0-----0---		---0-----0---
B-----0-----0---		---1-----1---		---0-----0---
G---0-0-----0---		-2-2-----2---		-0-0-----0---
D-----0---0-0---		---0-----0-0---		---0---0-0---
G-----0---0-0-		---0-----0-		---0---0-0-

servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride

*Once I was a gypsy girl but now I'm a rich man's bride
 With servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride
 While in my carriage ride, while in my carriage ride
 With servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride*

*As I went a strolling one day down London's streets
 A handsome young squire was the first I chanced to meet
 He kissed my pretty brown cheeks that no he loves so well
 And said my little gypsy girl will you my fortune tell?
 *Will you my fortune tell, will you my fortune tell?
 He said my little gypsy girl will you my fortune tell?*

Oh yes sir, kind sir, please hold to me your hand
You have many fine mansions in many foreign lands
And all those fine young ladies, you can cast them all aside
I am the gypsy girl who is to be your bride.
**Who is to be your bride, who is to be your bride*
I am the gypsy girl who is to be your bride.

Once I was a gypsy girl but now I'm a rich man's bride
With servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride.
While in my carriage ride, while in my carriage ride
With servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride.

Gypsy Girl- simple melody

4/4 time key of G

G		D7		G	
D---	0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---	-----	---0-----0---	
B-----	0---0-0---	---0---0-0---	-1-----	---0-----0---	
G-----	0---0-0---	---0---0-0---	---2-----2-	-0-0-----0---	
D-----	-----	-----	-----4---	-----0-----	
G-----	-0-----0-	-----0-----0-	-----	-----0-----0-	

G		D7		G	
D---	0-0-----0---	-0-0-----0---	-----	---0-----0---	
B-----	0---0-0---	---0---0-0---	-1-----	---0-----0---	
G-----	0---0-0---	---0---0-0---	---2-----2-	-0-0-----0---	
D-----	-----	-----	-----4---	-----0-----	
G-----	-0-----0-	-----0-----0-	-----	-----0-----0-	

G		C		G	
D---	0-0-----0-	-5-5---5p0-0---	-2-2---2---	-0-0-----0---	
B-----	0---0-0---	---0-----0---	---1-----	---0---0-0---	
G---0-0-----	---0-----0---	---0-----	---	-0-0-----0---	
D-----	-----	-----	---	-----	
G-----	-0-----	-----0-----0-	---	-----0-----0-	

G		D7		G	
D---	5-5---0-0---	-0-0-----0---	-----	---0-----0---	-
B-----	0---0-0---	---0---0-0---	-1-----	---0-----0---	* -
G---	0-0-----	---0-----0---	---2-----2-	-0-0-----0---	* -
D-----	-----	-----	-----4---	-----0-----	-
G-----	-0-----0-	-----0-----0-	-----	-----0-----0-	-

Questions & Answers

Spence out in the UK writes:

Hi Patrick, found you on the web and love your videos - although I do feel you have more than your fair share of musical talent!!

The concept of talent is a tricky thing because it's based on only part of the story.

In the workshops you see me as I am now. Grabbing a guitar, playing the subway shuffle and talking into the camera all at once might look effortless for me in 2006, but I spent a good chunk of the 1980's playing until my fingers literally bled.

Keep in mind that I don't see myself as anything more than a work in progress. There are things I am still working to understand. There are sounds I am still trying - sometimes fighting - to pull out of my instruments. Just like you I am still learning. The only difference between us is that I have a twenty-five year head start on the process.

At some point we are all students, teachers, heroes and fools. Like American football, it's an any given Sunday kind of deal because no matter how good you get there will always be somebody better and no matter how difficult you find the learning process there is always somebody facing greater challenges.

I am struggling to learn the banjo - I just can't get the speed or accuracy on the rolls

Drop the plural. Take one roll and use it exclusively. Forget about melody breaks and just focus on keeping a steady rhythm with that single roll while you follow the chord progression and sing.

Do that long enough and the rest will come along on its own.

I was told be a friend that I should perhaps try frailing as it does not require such dexterity. Is this the case?

Sorta-kinda.

It's as simple as that, but at the same time it's more complicated than that.

While it's true that we only use a single picking pattern in frailing, there is a lot to explore in terms of how to use that pattern. Take a look at *A Book Of Five Strings* to get an idea of what I mean.

Also I am not familiar with frailing

Use that to your advantage. Not having a preconceived idea of what you think something should be frees you up to discover what it really is.

Finally, if I haven't bored you too much is it easier to learn the Dobro, Banjo or Fiddle

It's all the same.

In Western music we are only working with twelve notes. The twelve notes are named after the letters A through G with a note or half-step between each pair of letters except between B and C and E and F:

A | B C | D | E F | G |

Your half step is either a sharp (#) or a flat (b.)

The half step between A and B can be called either A# or Bb.

A# means that the A note is raised one half step higher. Bb is the B note lowered one half step. A# and Bb are the same note and the other half steps follow the same pattern.

So with all twelve notes laid out you have the chromatic scale:

A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab

On any stringed instrument each string will be tuned to one of those twelve notes.

If the first string is tuned to E all we have to do is start on E and each fret will give us the next note in the chain.

E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E

In other words, an open string tuned to E will give us an F at the first fret, an F#/Gb at the second fret, a G at the third fret and so on. The instrument itself has nothing to do with this. It's just the way it works.

Once you grasp that, a little bit on how chords are built and a little bit on how scales are constructed (it's all in Five Strings) you can pick up any stringed instrument and figure out a way to play it.

Learn one thing and you learn ten thousand things.

-Patrick

12/5/06

Basic Frailing Banjo

A few years ago I started messing around with the idea of putting together a plain-text introduction to frailing the five string banjo that I could use to answer the almost endless series of, "how do I get started?" posts on mailing lists and forums.

Finding a way to explain the frailing stroke without pictures or sound files was a fun project on rainy afternoons. After a while a couple of drafts started floating around the Internet so I decided that enough was enough and went on to other projects.

But some ideas take on a life of their own. I kept going back to the text file to tweak something. After a friend saw the file and asked if he could use it for an after school project he was involved with I wound up writing *The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo*.

The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo was (and is) a success, But the idea of a free document to introduce people to a way of making wouldn't get out of my head. So I sat down for one more Sunday afternoon of work and put the following document together.

This is by no means a complete overview of the art and craft of frailing the five string banjo. It's just enough to get you started. Like any other art form old time banjo can be as simple or as complex as you want it to be. Dear old Dad covers things much more thoroughly in the *Old Time Banjo* CD ROM workshop.

What This document covers is picking up a five-string banjo, tuning it up, learning the basic strum and playing a couple of songs. If you want to go beyond that you can pick up a copy of *The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo*, read the free online version of *The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo*, order one of our video workshops- or just do what I did and live with the basics for about twenty years.

That's enough talking. Let's pick.

Tuning

The first step is getting in tune.

With few exceptions the exercises in this document are played out of G tuning.

When you are tuning your banjo you should know how the strings are numbered. The short string is the fifth string. When you are holding your banjo the fifth string will be on top and the first string will be closest to the floor.

Your banjo is tuned to an open G chord.

- The fifth string is tuned to G.
- The fourth string is tuned to D.
- The third string is tuned to G.
- The second string is tuned to B.
- The first string is tuned to D.

Be sure to have the string ringing when you crank on your tuning pegs.

This helps you avoid tightening the string past its breaking point.

To tune your banjo without a tuner just follow these steps:

1. Assume that your first string is at least close to being in tune.
2. Play your second string at the third fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the first string played open.
3. Play your third string at the fourth fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the second string played open.
4. Play your fourth string at the fifth fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the third string played open.
5. The fifth string played open should sound the same as the first string played at the fifth fret.

Basic Frailing

If we were face to face I could show you how to get this down in less than half an hour.

But we're not- and while text is a poor substitute for an in-person workshop this is the Internet and it's free.

Let's boogie.

Sit down with your banjo in a straight-backed chair that doesn't have any arms. (I know, the sofa or the recliner is much more comfortable but for now go along with me on this).

Sit up straight.

I said sit up straight.

I know, it's our natural inclination to slouch- it's more comfortable and it looks cooler- but until you can do this in your sleep you want to add a dash of ritual and discipline into your practice time.

So like I said, sit up straight.

Hold your banjo in your lap with the pot (or resonator) is flat against your belly. Not off to the side, not on your knee. I'd also suggest using a strap while you do this so your hands are not

Supporting the banjo.

Bring your banjo neck up so that the fifth peg is up by your ear. If you were facing a clock you'd want the neck up by 10 or 11.

With me so far?

For right now your left hand isn't going to have too much to do. Support your banjo neck if you want, or feed yourself pizza while you practice your frailing stroke. Chords come later, and then your left hand is going to be hopping around all over the place. So for right now send that puppy off to Club Med or something.

Let's put your right hand to work.

Stick your right arm out and make a fist.

Now stick out your index finger and thumb- just like when you were a kid playing cops and robbers you want that sort of 'gun' shape. Don't clench your remaining three fingers to your palm but rather try to relax and keep everything kind of loosey-goosey. Tension just slows things down.

The middle finger should be a hair extended.

Look at your hand. You've got your thumb up, your index finger straight out, your middle finger loosely curled and the last two fingers lightly touching your palm.

I know- it looks kind of goofy.

You should see yourself with that banjo.

Now that you've got your hand into a rough frailing shape that that whole arrangement of fingers down to your banjo.

Put your thumb on your banjo head so that you are just a little but shy of touching the rim with the tip of your thumb. The pad of your thumb should be against the fifth string. (And this is where text kind of sucks for this- if you were here you'd see a sort of greasy spot where my thumb has been hitting over the years. And no, I'm not that much of a slob it happens to just about everybody's banjo at some point)

Now rest your middle fingernail on the first string.

Allrighty. We're almost there.

Take a look at your hand and where it's at on the banjo. You'll see that you can just raise it up a hair and drop that middle fingernail down to strike the first string. Do that.

Don't flail around or open and close your hand or flick your fingers. Just use your thumb as a sort of pivot point to rear back (you won't have to go very far) and swing in down to strike the string with your nail. Let the string pop off of the fingernail. Try it hard. Try it light. Try it in between and try it just right.

(Sorry had a Suess moment there. Shouldn't happen anywhere . . . arrgh)

Once you get comfortable with the idea of just dropping your hand down to strike the first string try the same thing on your second, third and fourth. To hit those inside strings - well, look at your hand again. Your thumb is lying on the fifth string. If you close that webbing between your index finger and thumb you should see that you can swing you hand so that it's over the string you want to hit.

We're not talking big motion here. It's just a hair this way and a hair that way. Don't be all stiff and rigid. Relax. Mess with it a while. You'll drive everybody in the house nuts, but that's why you wanted to play the banjo, right?

After the strike the next step is the strum.

Hit a string. Any string.

After you do that close the webbing between your thumb and index finger so that you hand comes back over the strings and your middle fingernail is over the third or fourth string.

While all of this is happening your thumb is staying in place.

Once you've reared back enough (and enough is up to you but three strings is a safe bet) strike down across the strings with your middle fingernail.

So it's pick, rear back, strum.

Do that a few times. Get used to it. Keep the thumb in place. As you pick and as you strum it's a good idea to keep a sort of straight wrist. Your forearm is doing all of the work here using your thumb as a pivot point.

After you extend your hand for the strum you'll see that your thumb is putting pressure on the fifth string. Roll your thumb off of the fifth string, bring it up to your hand and then drop it back in place on the fifth string. It's sort of a rolling motion.

Once your thumb drops back (and you might get a nifty THUMP here and you might not- either way is cool) your hand swings your middle fingernail down (remember- there isn't any finger motion here- it's all in the forearm) on a string (your choice) and the process starts over again.

Pick- Strum- Thumb.

Bump Dit- Ty.

A quarter note and two eighth notes (1 2& 3 4&)

In TAB it's like this:

```
D---0-0-----0-0----|
B-----0-----0----|
G-----0-----0----|
D-----0-----0----|
G-----0-----0----|
```

Reading TAB

TAB is a teaching tool. If you look at the snippet of tab above you'll see the five strings of your banjo with the D or first-string on top and fifth or the short string on the bottom.

The numbers on the tab tell you what string to hit and on which fret to- you guessed it- fret the string.

The lines going down through the TAB are used to mark out measures.

A measure is a term used to describe how the rhythm of a song is laid out. The examples in this workshops are all in 4/4 time. 4/4 time is a rhythmic pattern where you are playing four beats to a measure. Without going into a lot of music theory (this is covered extensively in “The how and the Tao of Old Time Banjo”, and even more extensively in “A Book Of Five Strings”) you can think of 4/4 time as two bump dit-ty strums for each measure.

The example above is the basic strum in open G so all you have is zeros because there isn't any fretting going on. For the same measure in C you'd get this:

```
D---2-2---2-2---| - |
B-----1-----1---| - |
G-----0-----0---| - |
D-----2-----2---| - |
G-----0-----0---| - |
```

Nothing to it, right?

I'm not a huge fan of TAB , but in a text setting it's the only option. I'll stick a few tunes at the end of this, but PLEASE keep in mind that this is a folk style and as such only really works when you play the song as YOU think it should sound, not how it's written down!

Important:

A lot of the nitty gritty details of the stroke change from person to person. Our bodies all work in unique ways. I've got a buddy who adds this freaky little wrist flip after each downstroke. He can play very well so I figure there's no real point in asking him about it. It works for him, what I do works for me.

You can use the index fingernail, and a lot of folks find it easier in the beginning (shoot I've been playing long enough that I can get pretty much the same sound with my pinky) but from what I've seen you can get a cleaner, and in some cases faster, attack with your middle fingernail.

Another thing to keep in mind is that for the basic explanation of the frailing stroke I told you to keep your index finger straight out. I do this for the simple reason that it helps to keep that finger out of the way when you are just starting out. Once you get used to the motion your index finger will curl or straighten on its own (it really will) so don't fret about it.

There's also been a lot of debate about bending/not bending the thumb. The stroke described here works- the tip of the thumb playing the fifth technique works for others. Your best bet is to pick one now and stick to it. 99% of the problems most folks have with old time banjo are changing techniques and tunings over and over again.

Pick one, do it until the action becomes almost unconscious and worry about the unimportant stuff when you can play the banjo.

Chords

Let's get a couple of chords down so we can get you playing a couple of tunes.

Creating a chord diagram is kind of tricky in plain text- so I just set up a tab for the first five frets on your banjo neck. The numbers on the staff show you where to put your fingers to make the chord, and the recommended finger to use.

You already know one chord- open G- so there is no need for a G chord diagram.

C chord:

D-----	--3--	-----	-----	-----
B----	1--	-----	-----	-----
G-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
D-----	--2--	-----	-----	-----
g-----	-----			

F chord:

D-----	-----	---3--	-----	-----
B----	1--	-----	-----	-----
G-----	--2--	-----	-----	-----
D-----	-----	---3--	-----	-----
g-----	-----			

D7 chord:

D-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
B----	1--	-----	-----	-----
G-----	--2--	-----	-----	-----
D-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
g-----	-----			

When you are making your chords keep in mind that you don't have to press too hard.

A lighter touch will also help you in the speed department down the road.

For hand position, draw an imaginary line down the back of your banjo neck and keep the ball of your thumb right about there. You'll want to get a nice arch to your fingers so that you don't hit two strings at the same time.

If your hand hurts stop. Walk away for an hour and come back.

There's a lot more to chording- but this isn't the time or place to cover that.

Work with your chords. Try to get them sounding nice and clean.

Playing A Tune

Now, let's play a tune.

Boil Them Cabbage Down is a neat old tune you can play using your C, F and open G chords. The song follows your basic strum all the way through. It's a LOT easier to get if you sing while you play.

Let's take a look at the TAB file:

Boil Them cabbage Down

C	F	C	G
D---2-2---2-2---	-3-3---3-3---	-2-2---2-2---	-0-0---0-0---
B-----1-----1---	---1-----1---	---1-----1---	---0-----0---
G-----0-----0---	---2-----2---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---
D-----2-----2---	---3-----3---	---2-----2---	---0-----0---
G-----0-----0-	-----0-----0-	-----0-----0-	-----0-----0-

C	F	C	G	C
D---2-2---2-2---	-3-3---3-3---	-2-2---0-0---	---	-2-----2---
B-----1-----1---	---1-----1---	---1-----0---	---	-1-1---1-1---
G-----0-----0---	---2-----2---	---0-----0---	---	---0-----0---
D-----2-----2---	---3-----3---	---2-----0---	---	-2-----2---
G-----0-----0-	-----0-----0-	-----0-----0-	---	---0-----0-

The TAB is telling you to:

- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the first string holding a C Chord.
- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the first string holding an F Chord.
- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the first string holding a C Chord.
- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the first string holding a G Chord.
- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the first string holding a C Chord.
- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the first string holding an F Chord.
- Play one bump dit-ty strum starting on the first string holding a C Chord.
- Play one bump dit-ty strum starting on the first string holding a G Chord.
- Play two bump dit-ty strums starting on the second string holding a C Chord.

That's not too hard to do. Getting the rhythm smooth might be tricky at first but there isn't all that much going on with this song. The tricky part comes when you start to sing along.

Playing and singing is a great thing to do because it makes even the most simple banjo tune sound pretty impressive. It can feel a little awkward at first- but that has more to do with being embarrassed about singing in public than anything going on with the banjo. My advice here is to just ask yourself something like, if I can't stand having people look at me, why the hell am I playing the banjo? and then throw back your head and sing your heart out.

In order to play and sing Boil Them Cabbage Down you will want to break the lyrics up to fit the measures of the tune. That's pretty hard to lay out in HTML without flooding the code with non-breaking-space symbols so we're going to do this without using TAB .

I can hear you asking yourself, Without the TAB? Surely, you must be joking.

No I'm not, and don't call me Shirley.

Let's take a look at the lyrics for Boil Them Cabbage Down.

*Went up on a mountain to give my horn a blow
Thought I hear my true love say, "Yonder comes my beau!"*

Now let's break up the lyrics into measures.

Went up on a | mountain | to give my horn a | blow

Thought I heard my | true love say | yonder - comes my | beau!

So as you are playing your two bump dit-ty strums for the first measure you sing, Went up on a and sing, mountain as you are going into the F chord.

Take another look at the tab and see if you can work out the rest of the tune on your own.

Boil Them cabbage Down

C	F	C	G
D---2-2---2-2---	-3-3---3-3---	-2-2---2-2---	-0-0---0-0---
B-----1-----1---	---1-----1---	---1-----1---	---0-----0---
G-----0-----0---	---2-----2---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---
D-----2-----2---	---3-----3---	---2-----2---	---0-----0---
G-----0-----0-	----0-----0-	----0-----0-	----0-----0-

C	F	C	G	C
D---2-2---2-2---	-3-3---3-3---	-2-2---0-0---	---2-----2---	-
B-----1-----1---	---1-----1---	---1-----0---	-1-1---1-1---	-
G-----0-----0---	---2-----2---	---0-----0---	---0-----0---	-
D-----2-----2---	---3-----3---	---2-----0---	---2-----2---	-
G-----0-----0-	----0-----0-	----0-----0-	----0-----0-	-

Lyrics:

Went up on the mountain
Just to give my horn a blow.
Thought I heard my true love say,
Yonder comes my beau.

CHORUS:

Boil them cabbage down, down.
Turn them hoe cakes down, down.
The only song that I can sing
Is boil them cabbage down.

Possum in a 'simmon tree,
Raccoon on the ground.
Raccoon says, you son-of-a-gun,
Throw some 'simmons down.

Someone stole my old coon dog,
Wish they'd bring him back.
He chased the big hogs through the fence
And the little ones through the crack.

Met a possum in the road,
Blind as he could be.
Jumped the fence and whipped my dog
And bristled up at me.

Butterfly he has wings of gold,
Firefly wings of flame.
Bedbug got no wings at all
but he gets there just the same.

After you have spent some time with Boil Them Cabbage Down you can give Cripple Creek a shot.

CRIPPLE CREEK

G	C	G	G	D7	G
D---5-5---5-0-	---2--0-0---	---0-----	-----0---		
B-----0-----	-1-----0---	-0-0-----	-----0---		
G-----0-----	-----0---	---0--2-0-	-----0-0---		
D-----0-----	-----0---	---0-----	-0-2---0---		
G-----0-----	-----0---	---0-----	-----0---		

G	C	G	G	D7	G
D---5-5---5-0-	---2--0-0---	---0-----	-----0---		
B-----0-----	-1-----0---	-0-0-----	-----0---		
G-----0-----	-----0---	---0--2-0-	-----0-0---		
D-----0-----	-----0---	---0-----	-0-2---0---		
G-----0-----	-----0---	---0-----	-----0---		

(chorus)

G			D	G
D-----0-----	---0--0-0---	---0-----	-----0---	
B---0-0-----	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----	-----0---	
G-----0--2-0-	---0--0-0---	---0--2-0-	-----0-0---	
D---0-----	---0--0-0---	---0-----	-0-2---0---	
G-----0-----	---0--0-0---	---0-----	-----0---	

G			D	G
D-----0-----	---0--0-0---	---0-----	-----0---	
B---0-0-----	-0-0-----0---	-0-0-----	-----0---*	
G-----0--2-0-	---0--0-0---	---0--2-0-	-----0-0---*	
D---0-----	---0--0-0---	---0-----	-0-2---0---	
G-----0-----	---0--0-0---	---0-----	-----0---	

Lyrics

I've got a gal at the head of the creek
Going to see her about the middle of the week

chorus going up cripple creek going in a run
Going up cripple creek to have some fun

Girls on cripple creek about half grown
Jump on a boy like a dog on a bone

That's enough to keep you busy for a little while.

Be patient. Don't rush things. Give yourself time to get used to the basic skills and don't every be afraid to give your own ideas a shot. It's your banjo and it's your music.

Patrick Costello

9/17/03

Easy Bluegrass Banjo

In spite of whatever you may have been told to the contrary, bluegrass banjo isn't all that difficult. Like any folk instrumental style, making music at home or jumping into jam session really only requires an understanding of a handful of techniques and concepts that you can learn in an afternoon.

We're not going to look at playing lead breaks or fancy licks here. That stuff is a lot of fun, but in order for them to work you really have to be grounded in the basics. One of the reasons people give up on the banjo is they try to jump into the advanced material right away.

Look at it this way: Earl Scruggs didn't play Foggy Mountain Breakdown the first time he picked up his banjo. It took him years to get his skills to that point. It's going to be the same way for you.

Besides, what I'm going to share with you is a lot cooler than being able to play one song, we're going to walk away from this workshop able to play and sing thousands of songs.

Stop shaking your head. I'm not kidding here. In fact, rather than just telling you what we're going to be doing it would be much more interesting to just do it.

Come on, grab that banjo and let's start making music.

The first step is getting in tune.

When you are tuning your banjo you should know how the strings are numbered. The short string is the fifth string. When you are holding your banjo the fifth string will be on top and the first string will be closest to the floor.

Your banjo is tuned to an open G chord.

- The fifth string is tuned to G.
- The fourth string is tuned to D.
- The third string is tuned to G.
- The second string is tuned to B.
- The first string is tuned to D.

Be sure to have the string ringing when you crank on your tuning pegs.

This helps you avoid tightening the string past its breaking point.

To tune your banjo without a tuner just follow these steps:

- Assume that your first string is at least close to being in tune.
- Play your second string at the third fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the first string played open.
- Play your third string at the fourth fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the second string played open.
- Play your fourth string at the fifth fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the third string played open.
- The fifth string played open should sound the same as the first string played at the fifth fret.

Sit down with your banjo in a straight-backed chair that doesn't have any arms. I know, the sofa or the recliner is much more comfortable but for now go along with me on this. Posture is something you want to get right from the start

because bad posture can make the right and left hand techniques we are going to be working on harder than they need to be.

Sit up straight.

I know, it's our natural inclination to slouch- it's more comfortable and it looks cooler- but until you can do this in your sleep you want to add a dash of ritual and discipline into your practice time.

So like I said, sit up straight.

Hold your banjo in your lap with the pot (or resonator) is flat against your belly. Not off to the side, not on your knee. I'd also suggest using a strap while you do this so your hands are not supporting the banjo.

Bring your banjo neck up so that the fifth peg is up by your ear. If you were facing a clock you'd want the neck up by 10 or 11.

Now let's talk about your picking hand for a second. First off, I really wouldn't suggest wearing picks right away. The last thing you need is volume right now and once you get a feel for the rhythm of the picking pattern it won't be a big deal to put on picks later on down the road - and trust me, it'll be a big advantage down the road to be able to work with and without picks because, in spite of what some folks may say, you are not always going to want to be loud.

Now with your forearm of your picking hand resting lightly on the armrest - or, if you are like me and just hate armrests you can rest your forearm right on the edge of the tension hoop. I like working without an armrest because I can use the meat of my forearm on the banjo head to change the tone of the instrument while I'm playing. You can do this to get a softer sound or, if you mess around with it a bit, you can get a sort of wah-wah or rotating speaker effect . . .where was I? Oh yeah, with your arm resting lightly on the rim or the armrest drop your hand down so that your thumb is on the fifth string, your index and middle fingers are on the first and second string and either your ring or little finger (or both) is/are resting on the head to steady your hand.

Notice I left the right, little or both option up to you - and also notice that I said to "support" your hand. You don't have to apply any pressure on your banjo head. Just keep things light and kind of loose.

Got that? Cool, we're almost ready to boogie, but first we have to talk a little bit about rhythm.

Rather than talk about rhythm, let's actually experience it together. What I want you to do is to tap your foot on the floor four times.

No, we're not doing an impression of an old Roy Rogers and Trigger routine. There is a method to my madness here so just trust me and tap your foot four times.

Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .tap.

That was easy enough, right? Now we're going to do the same thing but count out loud each time we tap. Count, "one" as your foot hits the floor for the first time. Bring your foot back up and then tap again and count, "two". Keep that going until you get to four.

One	two	three	four
Tap	tap	tap	tap

Now keep repeating that a few times.

Count on each tap and after four go back to "one". Try to keep the space between each tap the same.

What you are doing here is playing a quarter note rhythm in 4/4 time.

No, really. I'm not making this up, that's really what you are doing here.\

In music everything from the notes you play to the rests where you don't play anything has a time value attached to it. That time value is defined as rhythm. Without rhythm the notes would have no context and everything would just come out like noise.

We break music up into measures with a specific number of beats. A beat is the term we use to describe the pulse of the music. The number of beats in a measure is dictated by the time signature.

The time signature tells us how many beats are played in a measure or group of measures. A time signature like 4/4 indicates that we will play four beats to a measure (4/) and that each beat will have the value of a quarter note (/4). If the time signature was 3/4 it would indicate three beats to a measure (3/) and that each beat will have the value of a quarter note (/4).

6/8 indicates that each measure will have six beats (6/) and that each beat will have the value of an eighth note (/8).

- A whole note is a note that is counted for the whole value of the measure.
- A half note has one half the time value of a whole note.
- A quarter note has one half the time value of a half note.
- An eighth note has one half the time value of a quarter note.

When you were tapping your foot and counting to four each tap was being given the value of a quarter note.

Nothing to it, right?

Now what I want you to do is repeat the tap & count exercise, but this time I want you to say "and" as your foot comes up after each tap. Count, "one" as your foot hits the floor for the first time. Bring your foot back up and say, "and". Tap again and count, "two". Bring your foot back up and say, "and". Keep that going all the way to four.

One	and	two	and	three	and	four	and
Tap		tap		tap		tap	

Now keep repeating that a few times. Count on each tap and after four go back to "one". Try to keep the space between each tap the same.

What you have just done is tap out an eighth note rhythm in 4/4 time.

Compare the two different counts. In the first example we were counting four beats and in the second example we were counting eight beats. By adding the "and" between each tap we were changing the count to cut the quarter notes in half.

Spend a little bit of time tapping and counting the eighth note rhythm:

One	and	two	and	three	and	four	and
Tap		tap		tap		tap	

In bluegrass banjo the basic picking pattern is made up of eighth notes. That, "one and two and three and four and" count is going to be the core of almost everything you do down the road. I don't mean to imply that you will only be

playing eighth notes. As you gain skill you will be able to alter this rhythm using any conceivable note value to phrase out melody lines, but for right now you'll be sticking to an eighth note roll.

What's a roll? A roll is just banjo slang for a repeating pattern of notes. The "sound" of bluegrass banjo is really created by playing a string of eighth notes - and as you get better you'll find all kinds of ways to play that string of eighth notes. Starting out with a repeating roll just makes things easier when you are starting out.

Rather than talk about it, let's play a roll.

Go back to where we were before we started talking about rhythm. You should be sitting with your arm resting lightly on the rim or the armrest drop your hand down so that your thumb is on the fifth string, your index and middle fingers are on the first and second string and either your ring or little finger (or both) is/are resting on the head to steady your hand.

The way we are going to be picking is really simple. Your thumb is going to pick 'down' towards the floor and your index & middle fingers will be picking 'up' towards your chin.

Relax; this is going to be easy.

- Pick the third string with your thumb. Count "one".
- Pick the second string with your index finger. Count "and".
- Pick the fifth string with your thumb. Count "two"
- Pick the first string with your index finger. Count "and"

"One and two and". We've just played half of a measure. I told you this was easy.

Run through that a few times and then add in the second half of the measure.

- Pick the fourth string with your thumb. Count "three".
- Pick the second string with your index finger. Count "and".
- Pick the fifth string with your thumb. Count "four"
- Pick the first string with your index finger. Count "and"

"One and two and three and four and"

That's a full measure.

Let's play this all together:

- Pick the third string with your thumb. Count "one".
- Pick the second string with your index finger. Count "and".
- Pick the fifth string with your thumb. Count "two"
- Pick the first string with your index finger. Count "and"
- Pick the fourth string with your thumb. Count "three".
- Pick the second string with your index finger. Count "and".
- Pick the fifth string with your thumb. Count "four"
- Pick the first string with your index finger. Count "and"

Play through this a few times at a nice easy pace. Be sure to count out loud and tap your foot while you pick so you can keep the rhythm smooth.

Mess around with that for a while and, when you're ready, we'll look at this roll in tablature.\

What's tablature?

Tablature, "TAB" for short, is a teaching tool. If you look at the snippet of tab below you'll see the five strings of your banjo with the D or "first-string" on top and fifth or the short string on the bottom.

Numbers on a tab line tell you what string to hit and on which fret to- you guessed it- fret the string. "0" tells you to play a string open and "1" would mean to play a string at the first fret.

Sometimes below a tab you will see symbols to tell you which finger you should use to pick a string.

T = thumb

I = index

M = middle

That roll we just played would look like this in TAB:

```
-----0-----0--
-----0-----0-----
---0-----
-----0-----
-----0-----0-----
      1  &  2  &  3  &  4  &
      T  I  T  M  T  I  T  M
```

By the way, this is the only TAB I'm going to use for this workshop.

This isn't the only roll. There are thousands of different rolls you can come up with. I just happen to like this one for a basic picking pattern.

Why do I like this roll?

Well, when you are playing in 4/4 time the emphasis is usually on the first and third beat. If you look at this roll you will notice that your thumb is alternating between the third and fourth string on the first and third beats. That makes it easier to keep a steady rhythm and put your emphasis in the right place without worrying too much about it.

The other cool thing going on is that alternating between the third and fourth strings gives a nifty alternating bass effect. When we start changing chords and singing in a little while that alternating bass effect is going to give the picking pattern a feeling of motion that sounds pretty cool.

Play this roll for a little while. Don't stare at your picking hand and don't get all tense and nervous about hitting the right string. Looking at your picking hand isn't going to help your accuracy - in fact it'll only throw off your rhythm because there will be a pause in your timing as your eyes send a signal to your brain to signal your fingers that you are on the right string. Being tense about screwing up and hitting the wrong string will only ensure that you do just that: screw up and hit a wrong string.

Relax. This is supposed to be fun. You're playing the banjo, an instrument somewhere on the wonderful scale between puppies in a basket next to a sleeping baby on Easter Morning and eating a chunky peanut butter sandwich on a spring day under a maple tree. Don't ruin the joy of making music by worrying and beating yourself up. If you hit a wrong string

keep going. If your rhythm gets funky stop for a beat and start again on the next beat. The only things that really matters is that your rhythm is consistent and you are enjoying yourself.

Keep playing that roll for a while. Give yourself some time to get used to how this all feels. If you're wearing picks try the roll without them. If your not wearing picks try it with them on.

As you are playing this roll over and over again mess around with where your hand is positioned between the bridge and the neck of your banjo.

When we started I left the "where" of the hand position up to you. My reason for this is simply because there really is no "wrong" place for your picking hand.

Let's draw up a really simple diagram and say that the first "|" represents where the pot meets the fretboard, the "----" represents the strings and the last "|" represents the bridge:

|-----|

Got that?

Now position your hand so that your supporting finger/fingers are close to the bridge and play your roll.

|-----x-|

You'll notice that the roll sounds kind of crisp.

Now position your hand closer to the neck and play the roll again.

|-x-----|

All of a sudden the sound isn't quite so bright. It's still loud, but it's not as crisp as it is closer to the bridge.

As you play your roll over and over again (after all, repetition is part of practice) move your hand between the bridge and the neck until you find a spot that sounds good and feels good to you.

Play the roll for a while longer and then we'll start working on chords.

Don't panic. The chords we're going to use here are really easy.

Your first step to making a chord is to position your fretting hand so that the pad of your thumb is on the centerline of the back of your banjo neck. Your thumb should be running straight across the back of your banjo neck not running parallel with it. Keep your arm relaxed. If your elbow is sticking out at a funny angle or if your wrist feels uncomfortable adjust your position until things feel right.

Lay your index finger across the fifth fret so that you are hitting all four strings.

Strum across all four strings with your picking hand. You want each string to ring clearly.

Have you got it?

Congratulations. You've just made a C chord!

Now I want you to spend a little bit of time playing your roll out of the open G chord and then playing the roll while holding the C chord at the fifth fret. Your goal here should be to switch back and forth between a measure open G and a measure of barre-C without breaking the rhythm. It'll feel awkward at first, but if you stick to it it'll smooth out.

Now I want you to make another chord. This will be exactly like the C chord at the fifth fret, but this time you will be laying your finger across the seventh fret to make a D chord.

Now you know three chords.

Just like we did with the barre-C chord, spend some times rolling between G, C and D. Once you can play a measure of each chord consecutively without stopping the picking pattern it's time to learn your first song.

In the diagram below I have broken the old song "Skip To My Lou" into measures with a number for the chord you need to play over the lyrics and the count for each measure under the lyrics.

In the first line you play two open G rolls and sing, "Lost my partner, what'll I do?"

In the second line you barre across the seventh fret to make a D chord and sing, "Lost my partner, what'll I do?"

In the third line you play two open G rolls and sing, "Lost my partner, what'll I do?"

In the fourth and final line you play one measure barring across the seventh fret to make a D chord and sing, "skip to my lou my" followed by one measure of open G as you sing, "darling"

Go ahead and give it a shot. Don't be bashful about singing. Keep the rhythm smooth and be sure to tap your foot.

Let 'er rip!

0		
Lost my partner		what'll I do?
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &		1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
7		
Lost my partner		what'll I do?
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &		1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
0		
Lost my partner		what'll I do?
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &		1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
7		
Skip to my lou my		dar- ling
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &		1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Hey! You just played a song!

Play through that a few times and then we'll talk about why these barre chords work.

When you made a barre chord on the fifth fret you were making a C chord and at the seventh fret you were making a D chord. The way this works is actually pretty simple.

In Western music (and when I say "Western" I don't mean cowboy music. It refers to Western civilization there are twelve different notes. The twelve notes are named after the letters A through G with a note or half-step between each pair of letters except between B and C and E and F:

A | B C | D | E F | G |

Your half step is either a sharp (#) or a flat (b.)

The half step between A and B can be called either A# or Bb.

A# means that the A note is raised one half step higher. Bb is the B note lowered one half step. A# and Bb are the same note and the other half steps follow the same pattern.

So with all twelve notes laid out you have the chromatic scale:

A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

Once you understand the idea of half steps you can just write out your chromatic scale like this to save space and make it a tad clearer.

The " | " symbol will be used to represent a half step.

A | B C | D | E F | G |

The frets on your banjo are laid out on half steps. When we tune a guitar to open G the barre chords wind up following the steps of a chromatic scale.

Fret:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
	G		A		B	C		D		E	F		G	

With your banjo tuned to open G a barre chord at the first fret has to be G#/Ab and a barre chord at the second fret has to be A. If you look at how this is laid out your barre chord at the fifth fret is C and at the seventh fret you get D. Since everything repeats itself after twelve frets you can get another G chord by barring across the twelfth fret.

Now rather than just using fret numbers, let's see what "Skip To My Lou" looks like with the chord names written in:

G	
Lost my partner	what'll I do?
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &	1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
D	
Lost my partner	what'll I do?
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &	1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
G	
Lost my partner	what'll I do?
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &	1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &
D	
Skip to my lou my	dar- ling
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &	1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

It's amazing how many chords you can make with one finger, but there are a lot of other ways to make chords. I'm going to go over a couple more songs with you using one-finger chords, but when you feel confident with that go ahead on your own and start looking for more chord forms on the Internet.

Okay, we know a two-chord song and that's cool - but now let's up the ante to three chords. I know, I know. You've got this wired now. No sweat, right?

In the next song, "Boil Them Cabbage Down" we are going to be playing barre chords just like we did with "Skip To My Lou", but now we are adding a C chord into the mix and there is one other little twist in the seventh measure.

In the seventh measure we are playing half a measure of G and half a measure of D. In order to do that we have to change the chord after "two and".

And easy way to remember when to change the chord is to make the change when your thumb plays the fourth string. I'll mark the change using the tab example of the roll:

```

      G              D
-----0-----0-----0--
---*--0-----0-----
---0-----*-----
-----0-----
-----0-----0-----
-----0-----0-----
  1  &  2  &  3  &  4  &
  T  I  T  M  T  I  T  M

```

Ready? Let's go!

```

G              C
Went up on the | mountain just to
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

```

```

G              D
give my horn a | blow.      I
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

```

```

G              C
Thought I heard my | true love say,
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &   | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

```

```

G              D              G
Yonder comes my | beau.
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &   | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

```

CHORUS:

Boil them cabbage down, down.
 Turn them hoecakes down, down.
 The only song that I can sing
 Is boil them cabbage down.

Possum in a 'simmon tree,
 Raccoon on the ground.
 Raccoon says, you son-of-a-gun,
 Throw some 'simmons down.

Someone stole my old coon dog,
Wish they'd bring him back.
He chased the big hogs through the fence
And the little ones through the crack.

Met a possum in the road,
Blind as he could be.
Jumped the fence and whipped my dog
And bristled up at me.

Butterfly he has wings of gold,
Firefly wings of flame.
Bedbug got no wings at all
but he gets there just the same.

Now take a look through the songs written out below and find one or two that you like. Sing the lyrics and try to work out where the chord changes fit into the roll. Sometimes the chord changes will be played halfway through a measure so remember how we worked around that in "Boil Them Cabbage Down".

I know, I know. It seems kind of early to be setting you off on your own, but look at what you know at this point: You know a little bit about rhythm, you can play a roll, you can play a few chords, you can sing two songs and you even know a bit about the layout of the fretboard.

If that's all you ever learn you can still spend the rest of your life finding songs to sing and people to sing them with. Go do it. If you decide to learn some other rolls and licks that's great, but right now you can sit own with a guitar player and sing out on the front porch. For some folks that's enough. It's not up to me to tell you what to do next. Learn more chords, explore rhythms, go jam, mess around with ideas for playing melody from books or other free workshops on the web . . .

Just follow your heart.

All the best, Patrick Costello
Winter,2004

"Mamma Don't 'low"

G

Mamma don't 'low no

G

Banjo playin' round here

G

Mamma don't 'low no

D

banjo playin' round here

G

Well, I don't care what

G

mamma don't 'low

C

Gonna play banjo anyhow

G

Mamma don't 'low no

D

G

banjo playin' round here

Mamma don't low no cussin' and swearin' 'round here etc.

Mamma don't low no guitar playin' round here etc.

"Riley The Furniture Man"

G

When I was a poor boy, oh so sad

C

That Riley from Virginia took

G

Everything I had

Chorus:

G

Riley's been here

D

G

got my furniture and gone!

Now it makes no difference to a rich man with all his fancy clothes
if you don't pay Mr. Riley you got no place to go.

Riley come to my house and these are the words he said
throw that cracker driver out and load that poster bed.

Now Riley he's a rich man off poor folks like me
every Sunday morning Riley gives to charity.

"Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms"

G
Ain't gonna work on the railroad
D
Ain't gonna work on the farm
G
lay 'round this shack till the
C
mail train comes back
G D G
And I'll roll in my sweet baby's arms.

Chorus: Roll in my sweet baby's arms
Roll in my sweet baby's arms
I'll lay 'round this shack till the mail train comes back
And I'll roll in my sweet baby's arms.

"Rosewood Casket"

G C D G
There's a little rosewood casket
G C D G
Sitting on a marble stand
C G
And a packet of love letters
D G
written in my true love's hand

Come and read them to me, sister
come and sit beside my bed
lay your head upon my pillow
for tomorrow I'll be dead

When I'm dead and in my coffin
and my shroud's around me bound
and my narrow grave is ready
in some lonesome churchyard ground

"Railroad Bill"

G
Railroad Bill, Railroad Bill
B C
he never worked and he never will
G D G
and it's ride old Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill was a mighty mean man
he shot the midnight lantern out the breakman's hand
and it's ride old Railroad Bill

I've got a 38 special on a 45 frame
how can I miss when I've got dead aim?
and it's ride old Railroad Bill

Going up a mountain going out west
38 special sticking out my vest
and it's ride old Railroad Bill

(*note: to play a B chord just barre across the fourth fret)

"Jessie James"

G C G
Jessie James was a lad who killed many a man
D
He robbed the Glendale train
G C G
And with his brother Frank he robbed the Chicago bank
D G
He'd a heart and a hand and a brain

Chorus:

C G
Jessie had a wife to mourn for his life
D
Three Children they were brave
G C G
But that dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard
D G
Has laid poor Jessie in his grave

It was Robert Ford, that dirty little coward
I wonder how he does feel
For he ate of Jessie's bread
and slept in Jessie's bed
And he laid poor Jessie in his grave

"The Wreck Of The Old 97"

G C
Well they gave him his orders in Monroe Virginia
G D
Saying, "Steve you are way behind time
G C
This is not 38 but it's Old 97
G D G
You've got to put her into Danville on time!"

Well he turned and he said to his black & greasy fireman
"Just shovel on a little more coal,"
and when we cross that White Oak Mountain
you can watch Old 97 roll!"

It's a mighty rough road between Lynchburg and Danville
On a line with a three-mile grade
It was on this grade that he lost his air breaks
You can see what a jump that he made.

He was coming down that grade making ninety miles an hour
When his whistle turned into a scream.
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle
He was scaled to death by the steam.

Method to My Madness

Tim in Korea writes:

Howdy folks. First of all thank you for the good work you are doing. I have viewed the 4 guitar workshops and am finding them very helpful. I have a few questions and comments. I've had a guitar for about 12 years though never properly learned to play. I'm one of those guys that you described in the video who can fret some chords but basically is just pounding on the guitar without a good sense of rhythm. Before I saw your videos basically my right hand was ignorant. So I've decided to educate my right hand. I'm starting to get the hang of the bass strum and i'm just catching on to the Carter strum. However, I can only do these consistently when playing in the key of G probably because those chords are more comfortable for me. So, my first question:

Is it ok to work on right hand technique with G, C, and D only and then move on to less comfortable chords after I feel comfortable with the basic strumming techniques? Or are there some specific reasons why your instruction starts withn chords in key of C? (For example you want to torture us by getting us to struggle with the F chord and the C chord with the ring finger fretting 2 strings. hehe)

Next question: I have a hard time fretting the C chord the way you do with the ring finger fretting 2 strings. I realize that you are doing this so you can get the bass G in the chord and free up your pinky to fret some melody lines. How limited will my development be if I use 4 fingers to fret the C chord? I'm finding that retraining muscle memory is quite difficult. Finally: In your first four videos, you do not use a flat pick. Is that going to be something we add later on (i.e. is this part of the design of the learning style to start with fingers then progress to sometimes using a pick or is the style that you're teaching strictly finger picking)? If so, will we be using the same strumming style except using the pick instead of the thumb?

[OK those were the 3 questions that came to mind when I viewed the videos. If you use these in your blog feel free to edit for brevity.]

And finally a suggestion. I think it would be great if there was a discussion forum on your website. Probably a lot of us are at similar stages in our development and we would all benefit from a discussion forum specifically for students who are learning from your books and videos. We could encourage and advise each other by watching each other play on YouTube etc...

Thanks again for being a good teacher.

I do have reasons for starting out with that particular C chord in the video.

In the first group of videos we were using these two partial scales:

E -----0--1--3--
B --1--3-----
G -----
D -----
A -----
E -----

```

E -----
B -----
G -----
D -----
A -----0--2--3-----
E --3-----

```

Those two scale bits give us enough to play a little bit of melody and a bass run and the way I make a C chord gives us the ability to use those partial scales while holding onto a C chord.

Over the next four videos we are going to expand on that and take it across all six strings - and once again we will still be holding a C chord.

```

E -----0--1--3--5--
B -----0--1--3-----
G -----0--2-----
D -----0--2--3-----
A -----0--2--3-----
E -0--1--3-----

```

Tabbed out as a string of notes that doesn't look like much, but played out of a C chord form what you end up with is pretty interesting because you can start mixing melody, bass and rhythm together in all sorts of crazy ways - and the pattern stays the same as you run through the rest of the chords in the key of C.

The only tricky bit is that in order to utilize that palette of notes we have to keep the little finger free. That's why I'm using a three-finger C chord.

This concept of mixing chord forms and scale patterns will work out of any chord position, but C is the easiest position for this kind of thing. In other keys we run into crazier reaches and the expanded scale patterns don't always go across all six strings.

So it's not just torture. There really is a sort of method to my madness.

That said, it's folk guitar. You are not only under no obligation to follow this or any other instruction. A honking huge part of the learning process involves you taking the initiative to change things to suit yourself. My end goal isn't to get your playing in any certain way. I just want you to play. If the C chord I use drives you batty then go ahead and try something else.

The stuff we have already covered will work fine in G and any other key.

Try it.

Never, ever, be afraid to try. There is an old saying here in Crsifield that I dearly love. It goes, "Nothing beats a failure but a try."

If it's just the fretting that is driving you crazy, one thing you could do to get used to fretting multiple strings with one finger is to mess around with the G, C and D pattern you are already familiar with.

All of this also ties into your question about flatpicking. The thumb-brush rhythm we are working with in the videos is the Carter strum. It's also the early stages of Travis picking, Ragtime guitar, various blues genres and a whole bunch of other stuff. Try fitting the basic pattern from the video with a flatpick. Try it with fingerpicks. Try it on a banjo. Try it on an electric guitar.

We are not working with a concrete style as much as we are exploring a concept. My long-term goal is to get you to the point where you take the concept and run off in your own direction.

That's one of the reasons we don't have a forum. If we created an online community for the people who are using our material there is the chance that the community would become so comfortable that nobody would bother progressing enough to leave it.

-Patrick

1/4/07

Why I Play The Banjo

We've talked about a lot of technical music stuff in this book, but to wrap things up I think we need to kick back for a moment while I tell you a story.

Hey, it wouldn't be a book by Patrick Costello without at least one story now would it?

I was just a teenager when I had my first epileptic seizure. I don't remember the seizure itself. All I know is that I was eating French toast watching television one moment and the next thing I knew I was being rolled through a CAT scan. To say it was a terrifying experience would be understating it more than a little a bit.

It was almost a full day before anybody got around to telling me what was going on. I was sitting in a hospital bed hooked up to an IV when this doctor strolled in and informed me that I was an epileptic. I'll never forget the disinterested way he said it. He could have just as easily been informing me that I had a soup stain on my tie.

He hung around long enough to knock off a list of things I was never going to be able to do. He also informed me that I was going to be on medication for the rest of my life. He was wrong on all counts. Then he wandered off before I could ask a single question.

I thought that there was somebody in the next bed, but the blinds were closed so I couldn't see him. In fact, I didn't even know for sure if anybody was over there until the doctor was leaving and I heard this guy on the other side of the curtain cursing. I was too confused to pay much attention.

I just sat there by myself for a while until my folks came in to see me. We didn't talk about what was going on that much because we really didn't know for sure what was happening. Dear Old Dad brought my banjo and stuck it in the corner but I wasn't in the mood to play.

Later that day one of the priests from our parish came in to see me. He was just as distant and as preoccupied as the doctor had been. Somewhere in the middle of his spiel he blurted out that God was punishing me.

He never said what he thought I was being punished for because he never got the chance. The curtain around the next bed flew open and there was this really big guy cursing and screaming at the priest to get out.

I thought I was flipping out again. Between the shock over what the priest had said and the sight of that very angry, very big dude thrashing around all I could really do was just sit there and watch the show unfold.

The thing I'll never forget about the big guy was his tattoos. Back in the early eighties you didn't see too many people in my hometown with that much ink on their skin. His arms were covered with spider webs, flames and dancing skeletons in so many colors that my eyes had a hard time taking them all in. He was the living image of an outlaw biker from a B-movie.

So there I was with this goofy priest on one side and the illustrated man on the other side when I finally realized what the big guy was so upset about.

He yelled at the priest about my visit from the doctor and that I was just a kid and the last thing I needed to hear was any kind of guilt trip. He said a bunch of other stuff that really can't be printed here, but he basically gave the good father the choice of leaving or getting his fanny kicked up between his shoulder blades. The priest did the smart thing and left.

After the big guy calmed down he said a few things about how much my current situation sucked but that it wasn't my fault. Then he tossed me a pack of cigarettes and a couple of dirty magazines and went back to sleep.

I was still in a blue funk the next morning and through most of the day. The biker dude got sick of watching me sit there and mope so he tried to give me a pep talk, but I wasn't buying it. I was pretty much convinced that my life was over.

Finally he told me to get out of bed and go do something. I asked him what exactly he had in mind (I'm editing the language here pretty heavily, folks) and he pointed to my banjo case and suggested that I go play a few songs.

Then he said something I'll never forget. "Maybe that's why your old man brought it here. Maybe he's trying to tell you something."

So I put on my robe and walked out into the hall carrying my banjo and dragging an IV stand.

I wound up spending the day going from room to room playing the handful of songs I knew. At first I felt like an idiot walking up to strangers in a hospital trying to play the banjo with a tube sticking out of my arm, but after the first couple of visits something started to happen.

People were welcoming me with open arms. It was like, "Hey! The banjo's here!" and the patients that I visited fussed over me like a member of the family. I played the banjo and sang songs like "You Are My Sunshine". After listening and signing along for a while they would start talking.

They talked about anything and everything you could imagine. What they were afraid of, what they were dealing with and what they had done right and done wrong. It hit me that the music (not just the banjo, but the act of making and sharing music) was creating some sort of a connection with the folks I was visiting. They saw the banjo and found an opportunity for something. It's hard to say what that something was because it was different for everybody I met that day. Some of them made me laugh and some of them cried on my shoulder. A couple of times I had family members stop me on the way out the door for a hug. People kept thanking me like what I was doing was some kind of a big deal and it took me a little while to realize that, to them, it was a big deal.

Someone had simply cared enough to show up. Somebody had come along with a smile and a couple of old folk songs to let them know that they weren't alone. I was reaching people. I was making a difference, however small, in the lives of the people I was meeting.

I was also finding out that I had something I could share. I wasn't useless. I had this banjo and I could use it to brighten my corner of the world even if only for the space of a few tunes.

By the time I wandered back to my room I knew what I was going to do with my life.

As I said earlier, we have discussed a lot of technical material in this book. I don't want you walking away from this thinking that technique is the only thing involved here.

We work in a heartbreakingly transient medium. When a song is over it's gone. We can play the same song over and over again but because of the variables involved we can never truly play a song exactly the same way twice.

With that in mind a "perfect" performance really doesn't mean much. Nobody is ever going to remember if you play every note in a banjo solo with lightning speed or accuracy. People will hear it, say, "That's nice" and immediately forget about it.

What people will remember is a feeling of connection with the musician. If all you can do is change a couple of chords and sing "Skip To My Lou" you can walk out your front door today and start singing for and with people. By the end of the week your hometown will be abuzz about how well you play.

A master banjo player isn't the person who can pick the most notes. It's the person who can touch the most hearts.

Books By Patrick Costello

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The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo

Patrick Costello shares the basic skills of old time "frailing" banjo and much more.

Starting with a simple picking pattern and a handful of chord forms (as the author points out, "if you know three chords you can play thousands of songs!") the book continues to build on those basic skills covering everything from complex fiddle tunes to working up chord melody arrangements of Dixieland songs and beyond.

A Book Of Five Strings

In this revolutionary follow-up to The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo Patrick Costello tears down the artificial boundaries imposed on old time banjo over the last twenty years and presents frailing banjo in a manner that gives the reader the know-how to play anything, anywhere with anyone.

Songs For Sunday

A banjo hymnal! Songs For Sunday is collection of 30 hymns, country gospel and spirituals arranged for frailing banjo. A great learning resource for new banjo players! Historical information provided on each hymn. Bible verse references suggested for each hymn. Songs For Sunday features clear, easy to read and play tabulature.

The Outlaws and Scalawags Songbook

Songs about villains, assassins, hobos, bad boys, badder girls and other folks you wouldn't want to bring home to meet mom arranged for frailing banjo.

The How and the Tao of Folk Guitar

Patrick Costello starts off with "one finger" chords in open G tuning and slowly guides the reader into exploring flatpicking and fingerstyle guitar techniques. If your goal is to strum chords, play rhythm in a band or to knock out complex fingerstyle guitar solos The How and the Tao of Folk Guitar will give you the tools you need to start your journey.